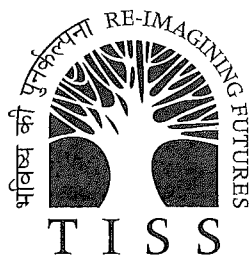# Widening Participation and Social Cohesion amongst Diverse, Disadvantaged and Minority Groups in Higher Education

Edited by : Mary Thornton and Govardhan Wankhede

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in

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Contents

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Note:

Foreword

This book addresses the fundamental question of what Higher Education Institutions can do to change the campus-based segregation in both social and academic environments that UKIERI students and staff respondents report as pervasive and ubiquitous, leading some students to feel isolated, separated, and possibly discriminated against. The range of issues and strategies that are addressed is indeed impressive and informative for all those seeking ways in which Higher Education structures and practices might change in order to enhance social cohesion and integration amongst students and staff.

This book is intended to develop guidelines for value-oriented programmes for educators and academicians. The strategies for change offered here make a substantive contribution to the research literature on widening participation for the disadvantaged, minority and under-represented groups in Higher Education. Each contributor, in different ways, seeks to facilitate and enhance social cohesion and integration on Higher Education campuses, to support inter-cultural understanding and learning, and to undermine the separation and segregation amongst groups that currently pervades the Higher Education arena.

Detailed and comprehensive information on the courses, funding and other facilities offered by these Higher Education institutions, pre-entry programmes to motivate disadvantaged students, career guidance by empathetic staff to enable potential students discover and embark on their path of study, and appropriate strategies and interventions to help the minority groups, as suggested in this book, will help achieve the UKIERI objective of widening participation in Higher Education.

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Enhancing Inclusivity in the Higher Education Discussion Group: Strategies for Employability, Internationalisation and Assessment in a UK University

THEO GILBERT

> "...*Social safeness is co-created in relationships via a host of signals and exchanges that are fundamental to health and well-being.*" (Gilbert, 2005: 22)

Current Concerns

Not all students, either undergraduate or postgraduate, are engaging effectively with each other as resources in group learning. Negative seminar behaviour that students employ with each other and with their tutors have been widely reported amongst 150 predominantly white, middle class *Humanities* students and their tutors in the 2009/2010 study outlined below at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK.

In this study, it was found that *personal safeness* is the main issue to be addressed in seminar/discussion group work. This was the case not just for students but for tutors too to the extent that they were sometimes inhibited from intervening in what Nitsun (1996) would term 'anti-group' behaviour amongst their students, such as with unequal floor sharing in discussion. The importance of individual perceptions of personal safeness from intra psychic threat, especially in any environment such as Higher Education where competitive stress is thought to be a cultural norm at the institutional level, could have been predicted by psychotherapists from Bion (1961) and Foulkes (1975) to Nitsun (1996), Yalom and Leszcz (2005), and Gilbert (2005).

For the purpose of this study, we want to know how far negative or disempowering tutor and student perceptions around personal 'safeness' (Gilbert, 2005) and safe agency, conscious or unconscious, impact

(a) group cohesion

(b) student reported seminar experience

(c) group critical output

and what we can do about it. The main aim of the study therefore was to formulate and embed for trial into the discussion based-seminars, learning and teaching interventions and assessments that were underpinned by understandings from psychotherapy:

> "... *When children and adults feel safe, they are more creative in their problem-solving, more integrative in their thinking and more pro social*" *(*Gilbert, 2005: 22)

Put differently, what can we do to acknowledge and address this reality in a constructivist sense? It is well-masked by 'differences' of ethnicity, nationality, gender — yet it underlies these, and it compounds 'difference' and explains how people can become anti social and withdraw.

Methodology

Stage 1: In October and November of 2009, forty-five newly arrived first years completed questionnaires on their **expectations** of seminars in Humanities, across subjects. Using SPSS software these were compared with the questionnaire-based responses of ninety-four second years to questions exploring their **experiences** of seminar behaviour.

Stage 2: The opportunity and requirement for students to learn how to attend to the safety levels of unfamiliar others and to demonstrate how they practised this within their seminars was set up with five tutors to embed (using a co-teaching arrangement with the researcher) into their seminar tasks. Three tutors co-taught once, twice and three times respectively under this arrangement for Semester A 2009/2010 so that the strategies could be piloted. Two tutor interviews and two randomly selected student interviews followed this pilot exercise. Two more tutors co-taught five times and shared with the researcher assessment of students on their Masters Research Methods modules, where students were filmed in their final seminar and assessed for both content and for inclusivity skills — cross referencing to each other, inviting, validating and questioning each other. The students on these modules and the subject tutors were interviewed after completion of the module.

Another tutor took part in a study across the whole of her first year History module for which she led two groups of 20 students each. At the start of the module and again towards the end (before exams) the individual students present in both groups indicated (by way of tick marks) those behaviours that they felt were noticeable to them in their seminars:

- monopolising/'filling' every silence

- not contributing—becoming anxious, bored, overwhelmed, hopeless, disengaged

- not reading in preparation for seminars

- locking eye contact with the tutor only despite being specifically located in 'groupwork'

- grading language such that not all can understand, not listening/attending to *the links* between the contributions of others and one's own

- not proactively helping others in difficulty, except in a competitive way for example, to 'jump in' even prematurely, and/or 'take over'

- not acknowledging or eliciting the contributions of others who are quieter
- unwillingness to interrupt 'long speeches'
- preferring to remain silent when 'lost' and not asking for any clarification
- isolating any student who asks for a clarification as the only one who did not understand
- not sitting in a way that facilitates group discussion; not facing the group
- Other

The aim was to see whether by the end of the module, there was any reduction of anti group cohesion behaviour being experienced by the intervention group, and then to compare these results with those from the control group (the intervention group was to work with this list in discussion, as will be described below; the non intervention group did not.)

On 26th January, 2010 weekly qualitative observational baseline work commenced with both groups. In May towards the end of the module, and after observations were complete, the tutor involved was interviewed and a focus group of four students from the intervention group was interviewed.

What did the interventions comprise that were not trialled in the control group?

Through personalisation exercises such as speed meeting where students sit in two rows (so pairs are facing each other for conversation/task work), and one row moves to the left every five minutes, intervention group students practised sustained eye contact, in graded conversation, with unfamiliar others (Vertegaal and Ding, 2002; Vertegaal, Weevers, Sohn and Cheung, 2003). This introduced students to the notion that they would be working with different people each week as directed by the tutor, that this would help them 'multi lens' outside of their cliques and work with those whose inputs and responses would be less easy to predict than those of their usual friends. It also helped to reduce the number of people in the group that students did not know. Having made contact with unfamiliar others, they were then put into groups of four.

To prepare them for the next exercise, they reflected on how they might wish their answers to the following two questions to develop as the module progressed:

(a) What do I contribute to the learning experience of my fellow students that they most value?

(b) What do my fellow students contribute to my learning that I most value?

Each group was then asked to discuss, within a time limit, how they, as a group, were going to deal with the behaviours they had ticked in the check list (above) in the most *compassionate*, proactive and effective ways they could. The ideas they produced formed the ground rules for the module's seminar interactions and they were supported in this with explicit help on how to:

- Validate, acknowledge others' contributions

- Invite others to speak

- Interrupt long speeches

- Question

- Rationalise

Thus, students were guided on how to recognise through body language the discomfort of others and to address it sensitively and proactively. Personal safety was therefore addressed more collectively and less individualistically. Language frames were given to students to help them evaluate each others' contributions before giving their own ("Your point may be problematic because/is useful because..."). Grading language was addressed – reduction in speed of speaking being particularly important for groups with diverse membership. The use of standard language rather than colloquialisms and other 'expressions' was also addressed; in Humanities, articulate, native speaker students have reported being lost in some of the language used in seminars and lectures and one of them has asked how international students cope. Knowing how to grade language appropriately for inclusivity is a highly employable skill, the practice of which in seminars can carry into academic writing.

These demonstrable behaviours, (rather than claimed attitudes), were immediately embedded into the subject tutor's set task requirements of the group. The subject tutor then maintained that requirement, encouraging, correcting and guiding, in order to facilitate the production of *group* negotiated ideas, that is, those derived from a constant process of cross referencing between group members.

Briefly then, after the initial, often brief, meeting with the subject tutor to find out what his/her plans were for the seminar(s), the skills researcher attended these seminars to explicitly embed skills strategies into them, so that the subject tutor and skills tutor were seen to be working together. Very quickly however, the skills tutor withdrew from 'the floor' to take an observing and monitoring role with students in their skills work, while the subject tutor was free to lead towards subject task achievement for that seminar. One aim was to explore which of these strategies if any would be noted by tutors in follow up interviews for use in future seminars with other students.

Summary of Interventions

- Personalisation activity

- Guided discussion of purpose of a seminar

- Overview and discussion of negative seminar behaviours and discussing/formulating solutions

- Small group discussion of scenarios (to check internalisation)

• Tutor reminders, support and encouragement to all small groups, core subject discussions, to increase inclusive behaviours: physical seating arrangements, eliciting, encouraging, validating, listening and eye contact.

Analysis

The method of coding was constant comparative analysis (Padgett, 1998). Then, when themes had been identified, these were categorised and subcategorised until saturation. After coding and theme analysis was completed, the data was searched again for negative case analysis. The qualitative data from observations, tutor interview data and student interview (individual and focus group) data was triangulated.

Findings and Discussion

Stage 1: Quantitative Exploration

Figure 1 shows that of 45 x first years, 66% (n = 30: red) expected that seminars would be competitive encounters; 33% (n=15: green) did not.

Of 94 x second years, 63% (n=59) students reported experiencing competitive behaviours. Nearly 37% (n=35) confirmed they had not experienced competitive behaviours. These findings are noted on the bar chart as second years' perceived experience.

FIGURE 1: A comparison of 45 x first year expectations of behaviours that will be encountered in seminars/discussion groups, with 94 x second year experiences (perceived and actual) of seminar behaviours in the School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, UK
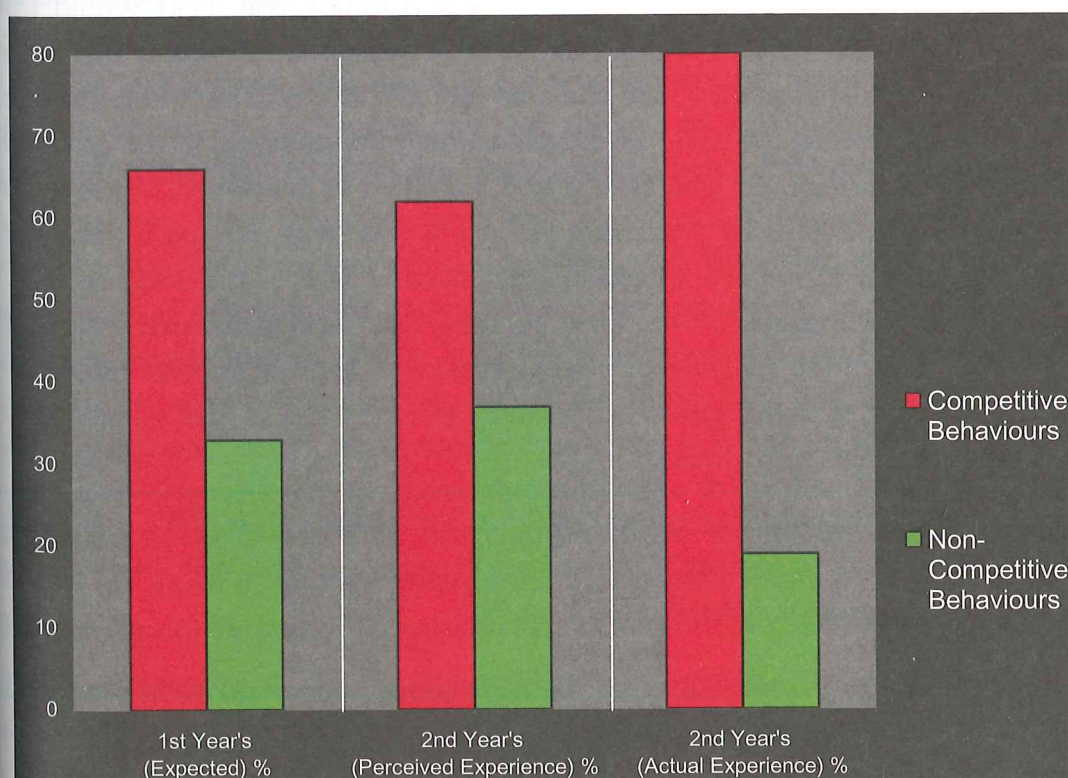
Looking at these latter 35 x second years to identify (from questions these students answered elsewhere on the questionnaire) what were not understood by them to be competitive behaviour, the responses given indicated behaviours that were nonetheless potentially undermining to their own or others' seminar experience:

- 17 felt it necessary to 'show the tutor they are reasonably bright'

- 7 felt it is necessary to 'show peers they are reasonably bright'

- 7 felt both were necessary.

- 5 of the 35 ticked 'T' (True) for "I haven't much patience with people who don't speak much in discussion"

- 16 affirmed they "could make a mistake and feel foolish".

- 18 affirmed they were "worried about their English proficiency".

It should be noted that the term 'competitive' was used in a lead question, but it became clear after data collection that this was a problematic term which should be put aside at this point. Nitsun's (1996) concept of 'anti-group' behaviour is probably a more useful term.

Stage 2: The Qualitative Data, Constraints and Anxieties, Tutors' and Students' Perspectives

Interestingly, four out of the six tutors (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6) participating in the study, all experienced lecturers and seminar leaders, felt that the mechanism of another tutor providing inputs alongside them in seminars gave them "moral support", a license to move away from old patterns: "Sometimes I feel like a performing seal."(T4) Would this team teaching have been seen by them in this way if these seasoned HE tutors had already felt absolutely confident of what they may and may not do in a seminar? For instance, what inhibits them from intervening more assertively among monopolisers in the group who are not so interested in seeing their own ideas tested, modified or developed, but in *avoiding* that (Yallom and Leszcz, 2005), by "wittering on" (T3). Or, why not pass the means and responsibility explicitly to students to address such events? Two of the tutors seemed to feel the burden of real or imagined institutional auditing, one seeking the permission of a line manager to take part in the study despite being a Head of Subject, another referring several times to his anxieties over the 'student-as client/consumer' model and to the pressure on him to make his seminars tutor-focused:

> "I have to say … the emphasis on student satisfaction here is quite a big inhibitor…the fact that you're in trouble if the students don't like what you're doing. You know that doesn't encourage you to try anything radically different, I have to say."   (T2)

However, at the end of his MA Research Methods module in which he had embedded the teaching and summative assessment of these inclusivity skills, his students reflected on their new behaviour in other seminars:

"Usually, me and S5 just look at each other and sort of acknowledge whether or not someone else has got something to say. I think it's just sort of like a mutual acknowledgment – weird isn't it? "

(S4)

This student also initiated a discussion of timing and assessment:

".... And I think if everyone had the confidence and the opportunity to talk, and they were given advice and sort of assessments – no not assessments – well yeah, assessments and teaching, on how to get involved and how to sort of talk their minds, then I think we would have benefitted....in undergraduate I think that would have been so much better – I just felt like I wasn't getting the most out of the class, and that's such a shame."

(S4)

In an interview, her tutor T2 had similarly noted: "If you're going to do this sort of thing, then you need to do it from the start." T3 also aligned with this MA student's view:

"I think the dynamics get set very quickly and people decide on a role for themselves within the seminar group... after a couple of weeks it's quite hard to change that dynamic."

(T3)

Indeed, one of his third year students, during the in-seminar piloting of the interventions, asked in the seminar: "Why were we not given all these techniques in the first year?" This prompts the question again of the degree to which these tutors question their own abilities, or perhaps the right to retake ownership of the *management* of their own seminar groups dynamics whenever they feel they need to. That said, T3 suggested that inclusivity skills were not his 'area of expertise' and that he was never quite sure what to do in his seminars when confronted with dominators and the disengaged. He liked the idea of giving students the task of reading in groups in preparation for seminars in order to support each other outside the seminar room. As suggested to him, he also redesigned his seminar task so that the students brought something they had researched on the week's topic to present for five-ten minutes in a group of four and then facilitate a discussion of it in that small group. He liked this, citing the quality of academic output that resulted as a main reason. Yet for more direct interventions that depended on him challenging individual student behaviour, he baulked - because of how these impacted group learning. He spoke of a technique suggested to him during the study, of looking away from a student who has locked eye contact with him to the exclusion of all others in the group, and directing his own gaze to whomever the student *could* be talking to instead, that is, the group. Although dismayed by a student's explaining that seminars were her chance to talk to the tutor alone and she wished everyone else "would disappear", he felt that breaking eye contact with a monopoliser was "a very obvious signal" to give and he did "not have the confidence to do this. That's me being wimpish." Later when asked if he would feel comfortable to reward demonstrations of inclusivity amongst his students, he said, "No, I don't know how I would do it, to be honest." Yet this tutor was clear about reasons for taking part in the study with his 20 third years:

"It was kind of useful to think about some strategies that could be used for managing, or directing that group. So - an investment I saw it as. ...this is the third year and they still don't know people in their groups."

Speaking after the interventions were piloted, two of his students were randomly selected for interview. S1 said:

> "I was made aware...you kind of notice that other people hung back, you started to notice that other people are shyer or didn't contribute and you realised that there were dominant students in the classroom."

The other, a mature student (S2), explained, interestingly, in a later interview that T3 had dropped a lecture in order to extend her L3 seminar time. At first feeling "cheated" she had now changed her mind: in his seminars she said, "... it's almost like you get three times as much done in double the time," though she explained why she missed the lectures ("...it's nice to be passive"). For T3's seminars, the getting-to-know each other exercises and the importance of sustained, inclusive eye contact had been the two main channels in her view for upgrading her seminar learning experience.

Turning to the intervention group now, all four first year history students of the follow up focus group felt the interventions had helped them to maintain eye contact with everyone in their group as inclusively as possible when they spoke:

> S6: "I would say eye contact, I use a lot more when people are talking."

> S7: "Employing the skills of eye contact has given me much more confidence."

> S8: "You can make more eye contact with everybody, so I felt more included in a group."

> S9: "Because you looked at everyone, it felt much more inclusive and therefore you put your point across as well."

The study reveals much feedback from students from L1 right through PG that could reassure tutors that intervening more assertively, proactively with anti-group behaviours and identifying and rewarding positive ones does not mean that their students think less of them. Findings here indicate more actual alignments than appears to be recognised between tutor and student aspirations for seminars, and what both are prepared to do to realise these.

One or two tutors who did not take part in the study, worried that the proposed interventions would further burden students. If true, students do not appear to have found this unacceptable: longer term it appears to have had the opposite effect. There is also the view that such interventions represent a dumbing-down of the discipline that will result in a lowering of academic standards. This is not only unsubstantiated in the findings of the Humanities study but, is contra-indicated in the follow up evaluations of six out of the six tutors involved in the study, including the two subject heads; and two external examiners. Moreover, on comparing the Level 1 control and experiment group (the intervention and non intervention group, n=40) in terms of *critical* output, the module tutor (having repeatedly stated her concerns over quality of critical versus descriptive thinking) commented:

"The intervention group — in terms of the questions they came up with - were better than the first group, even though some of the individuals in the first group (the non intervention group) were stronger than in the second (intervention) group; (I) got many more, - many, many more (questions) from the intervention group."   (T4)

This intervention group, though observed by both its tutors to be fractured and 'cliqued' at the beginning of the module with levels of disengagement, mobile phone use, off task chatting, and excluding behaviours with each other, were later working together much more cohesively, compassionately and effectively as critical thinkers and engaged in the strategies they had been offered. The questions referred to by the tutor above were those she asked them to produce in group discussion, at speed, that would indicate how incisively, how critically, they could interrogate the journal articles they were to have read in preparation for the seminar.

The Wider Context

Emma Kingston (2008) notes that the Higher Education Statistics Agency has been criticised for not being clear that poor academic performance accounts for only 25% of all HE drop outs. In her study of around 120 HE students at a London university, those most likely to drop out

(a) had high self esteem

(b) were not inclined to see other students as resources

(c) tended to be less reflective

(d) looked to external loci of control.

The students who most often finished their programmes tended to look to their peers for validation, and were more reflective.

What Kingston does not address in her article is the growing body of literature from within psychotherapy (Gilbert, 2005; Leahy, 2005; Bates, 2005; Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007) which argues that self esteem can be problematic. It derives from the measurement of one's own performance in some respect against the performance of other people; it is not based on compassion for self or for others and so as Gilbert (2005) points out, can lead to much self criticism when performance fails. Relevantly, Kingston correctly notes as does an extensive body of literature on learning: "even the minutest emotion" can impact learning (p4) (*cf* Gilbert, P., 2005, p2 above).

Thus, without social safeness, resentment can set into a learning community with ease, but this is never by accident. From a lifetime of observing closely how people behave with each other in classrooms, the linguistic ethnographer Ray McDermott writes in his seminal paper, 'Inarticulateness' (1988):

"....occasions in which people are left without words are systematic outcomes of a set of relations among a group of persons bound in a social structure...."   (p38)

These are words that resonate with those of Foulkes, a pioneer of group psychotherapy in the 1950s and 1960s. His idea, striking many chords with postmodernism, was that we are each the centre of a complex matrix of intra psychic relations—with all their histories, implications, influences, injuries and gifts—that impinge on or empower us where we are - at the centre of our own matrix. An entire matrix engages with many others when a single individual ever joins a group.

In literature elsewhere, HE group work—the practicalities of how best to arrange it - has been addressed in a number of studies coming out of many universities over the years (Wilson, 1980; Daniel, 1991; Mutch, 1998; Fejes, *et al.*, 2005; Kingston, 2008b; Kriflik and Mullen, 2007, Lygo-Baker, *et al.*, 2008). The options advocated to enhance student engagement in group work of the kind that is central to the seminar have included peer assessment, negotiating this usefully with students first, uncoupling reading altogether from the seminar, refusing admittance to those students who have not read, testing that reading has been done (offline/online), selecting members of groups according to this or that criteria, and many more. However, it is suggested by findings here that many of these strategies may not be enough in themselves until we actively engage in explicit measures to pass responsibility to our students to construct for each other the seminar space that is safe (rather than threatening) - a place to take risks, intellectually and socially.

We might consider McDermott's view that when individuals in groups are struck dumb, their inarticulateness, (unlikely to be continued outside the seminar room), can be "...understood as a well orchestrated moment in which (it) is invited, encouraged, duly noted and remembered, no matter how much it is lamented" (p38).

Conclusion

Using SPSS software to process data collected from working in other levels and subjects inside Humanities, and from triangulation of data from questionnaires, observations, one to one interviews and focus group, it was found that there has not only been a substantial increase in student sensitisation to the behaviours listed above, but also an accompanying increase in willingness to use proactive behaviours that do something about it. In interviews, tutors gave a number of insightful reflections, including how their own concerns had been about their own performances in a climate of 'student as client and consumer', the fear of increasing student stress rather than decreasing it, the remits (limits?) of their own areas of expertise, perceptions (real or imagined) of institutional auditing and worries about wasting time and dumbing down the seminar experience. All of these fears appear to have been allayed in the views of all tutor interviewees. There may of course be others not identified in the study.

If students were given explicit permissions and *rewards in assessment* for dealing with each other compassionately, then might they successfully set the communications skills bar much higher by themselves? It remains for the study to be repeated within a School (Faculty) consisting of a more diverse student population, ethnically and internationally, and to this end, the University of Hertfordshire's Business School with a substantial number of Chinese and first generation, native speakers Asian students is currently hosting the next phase of the study in 2010/2011. Results so far from the second study are indicating alignment with lessons learned from the Humanities study: that not only students but tutors too need support, with evidence based strategies that will help them to heal the cliqued, fragmented student learning communities that too often walk into their seminars and undermine task achievement. Much group work to be carried out away from the classroom – group projects, online discussions and so on – will depend on the very behaviours we see acted out in seminars and in this space lies our chance to direct compassionately and assertively how the dynamics are enacted.

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