

The capability for epistemic contribution as an inclusive learning outcome

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Miratho

- Our project focuses on inclusive higher education learning outcomes for low income, rural and township youth.
- Our team:
 - -University of the Free State: Melanie Walker (PI), Merridy Wilson-Strydom (CO-I), Mikateko Höppener (SR)
 - University of Nottingham: Monica McLean; University of Birmingham: Ann-Marie Bathmaker (CO-Is)
 - University of Pavia: Alberta Spreafico and Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti
 - Thusanani Foundation
- What we are doing is conducting a multi-method, longitudinal study; we are in our second year of data collection.

Background: Student lives and socio-economic conditions

- Low income students struggle to get into university and they experience further challenges of completing their degrees and then finding a job.
- South Africa is tremendously unequal with regard to income, wealth and intergenerational endowments. There is a strong correlation between socio-economic status and access and learning outcomes, suggesting uneven opportunities for many to shape their own futures and function in ways they have reason to value.
- Inequality and low income means there is no Plan B for poor students – if government does not help, there is no welfare or family net. If universities do not provide quality education that serves as pathways to the personal and public good, there is no family or prior schooling achievements to fill the learning gap.
- These social and education conditions and unequal endowments make it more urgent that university access is inclusive, not least because South Africa also has one of the highest rates of private returns from higher education.

Inclusive learning outcomes

- Nationally, the DHET transformation goal as expressed in 2016 states that transformation means, ‘when all students entering the system have reasonable chance of success and access to powerful knowledge and practices that will enable them to enter the productive economy and improve their life chances and that of their families’.
- Our policy frames ask us to revisit the question of measuring and evaluating quality and equality in higher education, and open a space for critical discussion on how and why we construct particular measurement frameworks, including how we conceptualize learning outcomes, and how we connect from the national policy level to the local level of implementation.
- Typically, learning outcomes are conceptualized as cognitive, in terms of graduate attributes, or as narrow competences and skills for the labour market. In our project we rather ground learning outcomes normatively by linking them to well-being and agency outcomes - intrinsic, instrumental and social. More broadly we understand inclusion to be grounded in democratic principles of justice and equal opportunity.

What epistemic contribution entails

- Having the internal ability for forming and sharing beliefs about the world, including the interpretation of one's social world, *in the presence of* the minimal social uptake required to make epistemic inputs without having them rejected on the grounds of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice.

Things that get in the way of epistemic contribution

- **Testimonial injustice:** When a person offers their view on something but receives a deflated level of credibility owing to prejudice on the hearer's part—in short, the speaker suffers a credibility deficit caused by prejudice in the hearer. If we consider this kind of failure of Epistemic Contribution in relation to absolutely basic information—information needed for survival, for instance—we are confronted with a picture of human epistemic subjects who need to cooperate as sharers of knowledge, and this means functioning not only as receivers but also givers of knowledge (Fricker, 2015).
- **Hermeneutical injustice:** When someone who enjoys less than some reasonable level of participation in the generation of shared social meanings, makes an unsuccessful or semi- unsuccessful attempt to render an experience communicatively intelligible to others (as a result of their limited participation in knowledge co-creation). NB. there is nothing disadvantageous about being 'hermeneutically marginalised' per se, it only becomes disadvantageous when one tries to render an experience intelligible in a particular instance or occasion, but fails due to the marginalisation in the first place (Fricker, 2015).

Social uptake conditions

- Conditions for social uptake vary contextually, but always require social arrangements being such as to reliably ensure that epistemic inputs are not rejected or discredited due to a lacking of:
 - believability resulting directly from some kind of prejudiced assessment; or
 - intelligibility that is caused by hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker, 2015).
- That is: No one with relevant epistemic materials to offer should be prevented from making epistemic contributions due to ‘epistemically irrelevant’ reasons (at least not without an appropriately overriding reason).
- The presence of this minimal social uptake condition represents a common epistemic and democratic ideal (Fricker, 2015)—around which we may try to construct conducive learning environments (where contributing to knowledge pools and taking from them happens more equally) within universities.
- Besides social uptake conditions, making epistemic contributions is also dependant on having access to epistemic materials. Both *informational* and *interpretive*.

Epistemic materials

- **Informational materials** - information itself, but also anything bearing on the question at hand, like evidence, critical doubt, hypothesis, argumentation etc. and
- **Interpretive materials** – anything required to make sense of a more or less shared social world, like different interpretations, but also anything related to how interpretations are justified or how reasonable they are, such as the concepts, theories or lenses used to conceive of them, or any other relevant critical materials (Fricker, 2015).

The question then is: Do low-income students with poor schooling backgrounds have sources of relevant epistemic materials from which to draw and make valuable epistemic contributions? Yes they do.

Do students come to university with what it takes to become epistemic contributors?

- While some people are enabled by evenly spread social uptake to make their epistemic contributions across the board, others find their capability diminishes or disappears altogether in some situations. In the case where it disappears altogether, one still has and practices the 'internal' capacity (for forming in principle 'gatherable' epistemic inputs) and yet the lack of social uptake means that they lack effective opportunities to make those contributions, and so their input does not make the pool (it is not gathered).
- One might argue that it is reasonable to dismiss low-income students' capacities to contribute to shared knowledge when they first enter university because they come from areas and have been to schools that are not conducive to developing epistemic materials that are valued at university. At face value, they don't have what it takes to make epistemic contributions, but when we consider the capitals they bring with them, we realise that these could be examples of (misrecognised) sources of epistemic materials.
- NB. Through stereotypes and the abuse of social power in higher education institutions like universities, **students** (in particular those who are poor, black and come from rural and township areas) therefore **often become victims of epistemic injustice**, be it as un/under-appreciated knowers, 'mistrusted testers, or as outcasts of the public economy of authority and credibility' (Schuppert 2015:124).

Potential sources of students' relevant epistemic materials

- Aspirational...
- Navigational...
- Social...
- Familial...
- Linguistic and
- Resistant...(Yosso, 2005).

CAPITAL

Navigational capital

“I felt like I’m really, really, really lost here. I knew that I wanted to do language practice but for the first few weeks I couldn’t like understand a thing because you’re seeing slides right now, you’re seeing white boards and everything, you’re seeing projectors, you’re still trying to adjust to the situation, acting comfortable but it’s not really that simple...but you had to make sure that you adjust to this type of environment and make it work for you.[...] one friend of ours who matriculated in 2014 ... was in university so we befriended him and that’s when everything became easier, he showed us around here and there and everything.

Even though he, himself didn’t adjust well to the situation but we learnt a lot from him in understanding the situation, how things work, what are tutorials, what happens if you don’t attend tutorials, and how to use Blackboard, how to send emails, how to download lecture slides and everything, all those things, he went about, giving us a way into understanding that...you’re introduced to these two worlds and in these two worlds you live, in these two worlds, in a different time of the day So, during the day I’m at school, I’m supposed to, act as if everything is normal to my life, smart to everybody, engage in school activities, engage in your tutorials, go to class and everything of that sort. But then, when the time goes on, I’m out to face the real realities of my life, which is all my life problems, thinking about tomorrow how am I going to get to school tomorrow if I don’t have money today”. - Dumisani, City University

Social/familial capital (Ubuntu?)

“It doesn’t do us any good to see our fellow brothers and sisters roaming around in the streets. How do we look at them tomorrow when you have succeeded? Do you look at him as your gardener? Do you look at her as your domestic worker? How do you get to see that person? Then it means that we have to do something as a young generation to keep each other up – as you go up you have to be pulling another brother up, who is going to pull another one.

I might not give you money today that might change your situation, but if I can give you information that might transform your life forever...so that’s what I’ve been learning in Thusanani Foundation, that it isn’t about the money that you get, it isn’t about you coming through into university, it isn’t about the opportunity itself that you get but it is about: what do you do after the opportunity? What do you do in the process of being in the education system? Because one cannot tell me that I cannot have time to actually even assist one learner with an application. That actually doesn't make sense because the time that I spend watching a series- then I should actually direct it to assisting one person...That’s what I’ve been learning through Thusanani Foundation. ” - Rito, Metro University

Linguistic capital

“By the time I’m at home I spend my time asking people information, because when I was defining this IKS I said it’s a cultural studies, so as for me, I’m still young. I don’t have that much knowledge about culture, about different cultures. So I go maybe to... you know, to old ladies and ask them information about the culture...and let me say almost every day I’m always adding some information in the lecture because I go out in the field and ask people about... I ask people information about IKS. So when I’m in class I’m having [something to share]”- Rimisa, Country University

Conclusions

- It is important to consider what capitals students might bring with them into university, that could be mobilised (through creating conditions for social uptake) if we agree that these are relevant sources of epistemic (informational and interpretive) materials.
- **The question of who gets to contribute to shared knowledge and/or shared social understandings that are sought after, harnessed, gathered or otherwise genuinely engaged with in any given practical context, but in universities in particular, is a locus of epistemic and relational equality and inequality** (Fricker, 2015).
- **The things that get in the way of epistemic contribution might point to wider structures of inequality** (e.g. we might consider unequal epistemic participation in lecture halls as a key mode in which unequal relationships and statuses within higher education tend to manifest themselves).
- **If all students have the capability for epistemic contribution**, even if only some of them will choose to function as epistemic contributors, **universities would reflect spaces of relational equality, thus disrupting one way in which the reproduction of inequality happens in higher education** (albeit unintentionally).
- **Therefore, the capability for epistemic contribution should be considered as an inclusive learning outcome- all students, but particularly those who might otherwise be conceived of as ‘empty vessels’ when they enter university ought to have opportunities to become appreciated knowers, trusted testifiers, and critically engaged participants of the public economy of authority and credibility and public ecologies of knowledge.**

Thank you

