***Participatory parity and epistemological access in the extended curriculum programmes***

*James Garraway*

*Fundani Centre for Higher Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa.*

**Abstract**

Student engagement is broadly understood to improve the quality of student learning, particularly students gaining qualitative outcomes in terms of ‘epistemological access’. In this paper engagement can productively be re-examined through a social justice lens of participatory parity. Participatory parity, a term coined by Nancy Fraser, refers to the ability to act on a more or less equal footing with others. In higher education ‘others’ would be both fellow students and tutors. The research tracks students’ journal accounts of opportunities to engage in this way from their classroom experiences. The methodological approach is drawn from activity theory and the data is thematized and analysed through the lens of this theory, research into engagement and participatory parity. We find using a social justice and activity theory lens illuminates and adds to our understanding of engagement from a student perspective. Furthermore it is suggested that promoting parity may be a useful tool for furthering the project of engagement for epistemological access.

**Keywords**

Social justice, participatory parity, epistemological access, activity theory

**Introduction**

The research in this paper concerns student engagement for learning, in particular learning for epistemological access. Although students may possess different epistemologies, the term is here used to refer to the central, guiding principles which constitute bodies of university knowledge (Morrow, 2009).

In this paper student engagement is examined this through the lens of social justice. The particular focus of social justice is that of students being able to act on an equal footing with peers and tutors, or what Nancy Fraser (2009) refers to as participatory parity. To this end the paper sets out to examine the following questions and sub questions:

What are students' and higher educators' experiences related to participatory parity in higher education. At a more detailed level, what insights can be gleaned from reported experiences of students? What are the constraints and enablements for students to participate as peers/equals with regard to participatory parity? In addition, and to a much lesser extent, how can transformative pedagogical practices be used to make it possible to achieve parity?

**Engagement, participatory practice and social justice**

Wimpenny and Savin-Baden’s (2013) paper synthesises students‘ experiences of engagement drawing from a number of selected papers, and identifies a number of trends in research, for example: engagement as the forming of multiple relations amongst students, between students and tutors and the careers they are aiming at (inter-relational engagement); engagement as a process of changing agency in which students begin to experience themselves as more competent and self-sufficient in their fields of study; emotional engagement in which the primary pointers are student resilience and persistence; and engagement as sharing connections or disjunctions between students and others, often with strong undertones of social justice perceptions. All of these trends were apparent in the data gathered in this research, but orientations to social justice were of particular interest here.

Engagement and participation for learning can be integrated with social justice through the concept of participatory parity, which has been developed by the eminent US political scientist Nancy Fraser (2009). Participatory parity refers to the ability to interact on an equal footing in particular circumstances - such as in a learning context of higher education. Being able to interact on an equal footing is regarded as particularly important for education in South Africa, where inequalities continue to plague the field of higher and other levels of education. The need to overcome our apartheid past in terms of the impact of racially exclusionary policies is an on-going battle.

Fraser (2009) alludes to various types of societal processes which may promote parity. When these are combined with Henschke’s (2010) work on stimulating learning it is now possible to extend Fraser’s version of societal parity to parity in higher education. Firstly, there is the establishment of an environment where students can feel free to ask questions, respond to peers and engage in intellectual thought experiments without being censored. Secondly, students should experience themselves as much as possible as equal partners in the production and distribution of knowledge (even though this may not always be feasible), through for example, being permitted and able to bring forward their own opinions and ideas.

The extended curriculum programmes (ECP) are an attempt by government in South Africa to increase throughput of students who, for historical reasons and current unequal distribution of educational resources, experience difficulty in coping with the academic project. The aim of ECP is thus to create conditions in which students can gain parity with their more educationally and socially advantaged peers. One of the main thrusts in Higher Education to achieve this goal of parity is teaching for epistemological access i.e. access to the ways of doing and thinking at the university in their particular fields, as opposed to simply physical access (Morrow, 2009) so that students are able to operate more confidently and independently. Consequently, Muller (2012) describes creating the conditions for epistemological access as having a strong social justice agenda within higher education.

The concepts of epistemological access and social justice can, in addition, be brought into closer contact through the British philosopher Karin Fricker’s (2013) concept of epistemic in/justice. Epistemic in/justice correlates well and can extend Fraser’s concept of participatory parity for social justice. Epistemic in/justice can manifest itself in two main ways. Firstly testimonial injustice refers to where the speakers discourse lacks credibility from the perspective of the hearer. For example, the lecturer may not hear or value student concerns, ideas and opinions, or even try to elicit them, as these are not viewed as credible. This is similar to Fraser’s (2009) concept of injustice being not feeling free to engage with staff and experience themselves on an equal footing, for example through offering contributions in the classroom. The problem here is twofold as the lecturer does not access what potentially important knowledge or even misunderstandings the students bring forward so that they can enlarge and even adjust their teaching, and students may therefore experience themselves as voiceless.

Secondly, Fricker’s (2013) epistemic in/justice concept of hermeneutic injustice extends Fraser’s social injustice argument. It refers to where students do not have the resources to properly make sense of an educational experience. For example, lecturers may present students with engaging discursive tasks so they may better learn complex concepts and so gain some measure of epistemic access. However, students may experience these activities, rather, as an opportunity to interact, communicate and have ‘fun’. Furthermore, having the resources to make sense of education can be linked to the Activity Theory concept of tools which students do/do not have to mediate their learning.

**Methodology**

Data gathering was carried out using reflexive journal entries from both staff teaching and the students in the class. Using reflexive diaries allows us to obtain rich data on students’ experiences (Cousins, 2009). We thus look at the classroom activities through the students and staff’s eyes, as they report on them. Following the work of Edwards (2015) students were asked to record what activities they undertook in class and what actions they carried out to promote participatory parity in their classrooms. Furthermore we asked them what their aims and rationale were for engaging in these activities and actions. As this may be quite challenging for first year students they were first taken through an example of an interactive, participatory class. Similar questions were also posed to teaching staff over the same time period, on activities, actions they set in motion and their motives for so doing, but now from their perspective.

Getting information from both students and staff was important for the research as it enabled us to see the extent to which the object students were working on had the same or similar object motive – i.e what matters –for students and staff members (Edwards, 2015). What matters effectively mediates between how and whether students engage with activities presented to them by staff. There may be differences but what we would like to see is where there can be some common ground between the staff and students so that students are encouraged and feel able to engage rather than to simply comply (Edwards, 2015).

Ideally we would have liked to have collected a number of these journal entries from staff, but although students were something of a captive audience – the journals were filled in in class time with their and their lecturers consent – staff were less willing to engage; only one staff member out of 5 who were teaching in this period gave weekly journal entries.

Incorporating more individual actions embedded within more significant collective activities which are in turn pushed and pulled by an object/motive links the method to activity theory analysis (Edwards, 2015). It is hoped that the research will uncover not just examples of promoting parity but also parity as a method towards promoting epistemic access; this should be revealed where staff and students reflect on activities and motives for doing them.

In analysing the data we are interested in the extent to which staff created opportunities for students to engage on an equivalent basis in the classroom, in other words allowed them to ask questions, give opinions discuss and so on. We are also interested in the extent to which these activities related to access to ‘powerful knowledge’. Furthermore, where we could, we wanted to know whether these activities related to the goals which staff expressed.

Analysis was firstly done through the lens of student engagement following the useful categories described by Wimpenny and Savin-baden (2013) in their synthesis of student engagement research (inter-relational, developing autonomy, emotional and disjunction/association). This was really to categorise and reduce the data (Cousins, 2009) so that trends which may give us some insight into issues of participatory parity may emerge. This initial analysis was not restricted to Wimpenny and Savin-baden’s categories but also included categories of engagement raised by Case (2007) and Case, Marshal and Linder (2010). Case’s work was useful in this applied science participatory study as it was in the SET field (Engineering).

**Analysing the data**

In reading students accounts of the participatory activities they engaged in, it was striking how many of these appeared to be more about procedural knowledge – how to do things – than about more epistemic characteristics of the field – propositions, concepts and their interrelatedness. Some of the examples students gave were of science practicals (growing bacteria from their mouths, using scientific instruments to stain and view bacteria), doing physics and maths calculations, learning how to use library search engines, comparing food labels for different descriptive elements and so on). However, what was interesting was how students in some instances perceived these activities as related to their professional field, for example:

I really wanted to do it (stain and view bacteria) because I will encounter it daily in the profession I am pursuing.

Though this sort of engagement can be described as procedural it also relates to the students’ nascent sense of becoming in the field, which would surely be a strong motive to participate, what Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2012) refer to as inter-relational engagement through a connection of study to career. A further point of interest is the contrast which emerges between students’ perceptions of why they engage with procedural activities and staff’s underlying purpose. For example, in the bacterial growth experiments, students clearly enjoyed participating:

It was very interesting because a group of guys around me were just laughing at each other about the amount of ‘bacterios’ they have. I wanted to do this because it was the first time I see the growth of bacteria. The lecturer made it sound so interesting so I just had to do it. I also enjoy doing things.

But for the lecturer there was a different purpose, which is less about procedure and pleasure and more about attempting to make an epistemic point:

The reason why I did this activity with the students was to demonstrate the importance of hand-washing before and after a Microbiology practical; and also to demonstrate that bacteria is everywhere, and to demonstrate the difference between sanitation and sterilization - all concepts the students were introduced during a formal lecture

In terms of the actions students engaged with theses are mostly typical of classroom/practical activity such as ‘… tried the question, explained to a friend and got the tutor to confirm it’. A common participatory experience for students was a form of ‘show and tell’ in which a student would be selected to present the solution to an equation in front of the class on the whiteboard. Students found this somewhat daunting but so long as they felt that they knew what they were doing the task was not too onerous:

We were given a physics problem on kinematics and asked to solve it individually. I felt so encouraged and happy to try it on my own without anyone’s help. He first explained the chapter and gave a few examples on how to tackle the questions. I worked it out and he randomly selected pupils to work on the problem on the board. I was luckily chosen, I was so confident to take part in the activity, although I had a few hiccups but I managed because the lecturer made me feel so safe. It interested me because we shared our own ways of understanding and seeing everyone participate in class.

As well as experiencing ‘sharing of understandings’ there is furthermore a sense of security provided by the lecturer. Students frequently talk of the ease they experience in accessing lecturers out of class or asking tutors questions in lecturers (‘we can ask them anything’). This was an experience shared by other students as they perceived lecturers to often be caring and creating safe spaces for interaction. Wimpenny and Savin-baden (2012) highlight the importance of what they term safe ‘psychosocial spaces’ which can be strongly illustrated by this comment from a student:

My lecturers are the best I won’t lie lecturers answer and if you do not understand you can go to their office … there is so much care at ECP …. Our lecturers are like mothers to us.

However although there are illustrations of care and creating these safe spaces, some students may experience learning through participation as ‘alienating’ (Case, 2010) or as something different to their own lifeworld that in a sense does injustice to them (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2012). Students thus talk of fear of being ‘shouted at’, of being seen as stupid by their peers (particularly where the peers seem to have understood the task) or of not having the appropriate English to form an answer, which is likely to be the case where the medium of instruction (English) is not the first language of many of students:

I felt there is a barrier … I fear being mocked by the class … of answering stupidly.

And:

I felt he needed to elaborate further but I did not ask as I did not have confidence in my English

The language gap can be seen as an example of a student not feeling they have the resources to raise issues in class, a form of ‘hermeneutic injustice’ (Fricker 2013). As Fricker suggest, such injustice plays both ways. Not only is the student not getting access to the knowledge they require but the lecturer is unable to adapt and improve their teaching to suit their students.

Another comment that stood out for the researcher involved a student experiencing participation as something of an onerous task, foisted onto students against their will.

In their eyes we must interact everyday, even if we do not understand the answer.

Participation here is not something students do of their own volition. This raises questions about the autonomy of students in their participation. As Boughey (2006) describes there are disciplinary university practices, and participation may be one of these, which are pretty much set out for students with limited opportunity to do things differently. However, it was notable that where students, even within this frame, could come up with a new approach, it was strongly motivating, for example:

He just wanted me to show him another way (to solve a problem) and he liked it because it was simpler than his and that made me happy.

This was one example out of four or five entries of the student making a contribution (Collis and Moonen, 2001) to the class, in this instance in relation to the lecturer. The student experiences epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013) as the ideas they are bringing forward are valued on a more or less equivalent basis as those of the lecturer, and social justice in Fraser’s (2009) terms as students experience themselves as acting on an equal footing with their lecturers. Students do not only experience making a contribution in relation to the lecturer, but also in changing the way things are happening within a set task, primarily between themselves and other students. Students talk of ‘noise’, ‘tiffs’ and ‘some were even arguing!’ (student exclamation mark) indicating excitement in engagement but also that different ideas were being raised from those initially presented by the lecturer, as the following quote outlines with reference to’straying’:

The class was fun, there was lot of interaction between students and the lecturer and it was made fun by ‘straying’ as we learnt new things… the mood in which the lecturer presented the class was very light and easy.

A further trend emerging from the student diaries was that of engagement as working with difficulty, struggling and overcoming these difficulties, often at the individual level. Students here engage at an emotional level, particularly in having confidence about what you know:

We had this tutorial to do two days in advance, I had no idea I was stuck, I was so angry. I came with the tut undone in class. I asked the tutors and after their explanation I actually knew that I knew what was going on here … you can doubt yourself even if you know something. I started to believe and told myself ‘Khuselwa you’ve got this and you can do this’. Then I would write what I think is right, call the lecturer and find 90% of the stuff is correct. Most of the time I thought my questions were stupid but I was amazed when I asked the lecturer something and I got the lecturer and the tutors thinking and I thought wow, every question is important.

The importance of persistence has been highlighted in Barnett’s (2007) work on students’ will to learn, that learning at university often involves entering a realm of uncertainty, characterised by numerous possible pitfalls. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) note that persistence is a characteristic of many students’ ability to engage, but that we know little of what enables such persistence.

**Conclusions**

Much has been written on student participation in higher education practice, often from the student perspective (Wimpenny and Savin-baden, 2013; Case, 2007; Case, Marshal and Linder, 2010), and how such participation enhances student learning (Tinto, 2007). Viewing participation from the perspective of social justice through a participatory parity lens focuses attention on the sorts of enabling environments which allow students to exercise agency in the classroom. This occurs where students experience the environment as sufficiently ‘safe’ for them to bring forward new ideas and ways of doing, and has the potential to result in quality outcomes for the student. Furthermore, Fricker’s (2013) concept of epistemic injustice offers an additional lens in that engagement may not occur, not because lecturers do not create conducive environments, but because students do not have the resources to respond to these invitations. This could be an issue of language where the MOI is English, or that students simply do not know the field sufficiently well to hazard guessing and answer.

The underpinning theory was that of social justice through participatory parity. The activity theory methodology to generate data supports and strengthens this in a number of ways. Firstly, thorough asking students (and in one instance, staff) about an activity where they felt they could participate, we are able to ascertain the nature of the activity. What we found was that most of the activities students’ reported on were of a procedural nature, rather than helping students to tap into the core epistemic nature of the field. Bearing in mind Bernstein’s (2000) contribution that it is this powerful knowledge, rather than just procedural knowledge, which enables students to take greater control of their progress in the university, the current participatory teaching and learning initiatives are perhaps missing this opportunity. However, as was pointed in the one journal submission by a staff member, some form of access to powerful knowledge may be the intention of the lecturer but this is either not successfully transmitted by the lecturer to the students, or the conceptual point is not recognised by students, possibly because they lack the resources to do so.

Students often talk of how helpful lecturers are, how they can ask them questions around the tasks they have been set, and in one extreme instance how the lecturers are like ‘mothers’. In Fraser’s (2009) analysis of social injustice this is an example of ‘misframing’ in which those who are marginalised can only ‘be supplicants for the benevolence of others’ (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012: 690), rather than being able to challenge the root causes which create this inequality, for example through contributing new ideas or processes.

Secondly, student actions in working on the classroom tasks reveal something about the tools which student s bring to bear in order to participate, which are interesting in their own right. As above there are the more normative approaches/tools such as asking tutors questions and talking to peers, and feeling able to do this. There are also more interesting tools such as ‘arguing’, ‘tiff(ing)’ and ‘straying’ in discussion mostly with peers which indicate a different order of engagement. Here students are not necessarily ‘supplicants’ locked into the received university discourse but are beginning to bring forward potentially fresh ideas and ways of thinking. Turning again to Fraser’s (2009) work these tools can be seen as ‘not just affirming’ their positions on the university but possibly ‘transforming’ them through their agency (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012: 690).

Thirdly, the activity methodology reveals that participation works best where students understand the activity/task as both pleasurable and purposeful (‘it is what I will be doing’). In Edwards’ (2015) terms students are engaged with what ‘matter’ to them, whether this be because they are learning something new, something which interests them or something which connects them to a future career. From this perspective, creating an environment where students are working on what matters to them has the potential to enhance persistence and in so doing, participatory parity. Better still participatory parity can be further advanced if there is alignment between what matters in terms of epistemic access from lecturers’ perspectives and what matters to students.

Although students in this study do on the whole engage, particularly as these are extended programme students, this is often on an uneven terrain as one of the purposes of higher education is the induction of students into university practices (Boughey, 2006), thus potentially creating a tension between parity and acquisition. However, where parity is a way of allowing students to question, argue about and try out the powerful knowledge in new ways, for example in projects, then these actions can be seen as tools to both engage with and access the powerful knowledge of the discipline.

Social justice approaches can challenge more typical approaches to engagement in higher education or ‘the false higher education rhetoric of openness, access and inclusivity’ (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013: 325). They can furthermore, perhaps, open up spaces for enhancing ‘epistemological access’ through allowing qualitative engagement with the powerful knowledge of the disciplines.

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