

Radical Interventions in Teaching and Learning

**How the partnership agenda can
help create radical and inclusive
learning spaces**

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Introduction

We are at a tipping point in the future of higher education. The partnership agenda is gaining traction and it is setting the debate for a radical overhaul of teaching and learning.

But the continued obsession with marketisation has de-valued our education, and the role of students and academics in it, while at the same increasing the financial cost to students and attacking staff wages, pensions and job security.

Rather than driving innovation and diversity in teaching and learning, responses to the market have blinkered universities, making them focus on short-term financial interests and marketing gimmicks.

We know that good quality, forward-thinking education doesn't come from universities competing against one another to develop good teaching and learning in secret; it comes from students and academics working together and providing innovative forms of pedagogy, based on challenge and collaboration. We need an education that views the diversity of students, not as challenge to be overcome, but as a core part of an education that allows us to learn from each other.

And this is why we shouldn't shy away from being radical. To create something radical is to look at the world and believe that things can be better, and to strive to make it so.

So when it comes to education, I won't settle for a system that works well for some and not others. I want a system that works well for everyone. We must take on existing privileges and inequalities, to end discrimination and oppression. Unless the spaces in which we learn are safe and inclusive for people to confront

these issues head on, we will never fully grasp education's potential as a tool for social good.

We have put our claim on the partnership agenda in education, setting out a radical vision for how students can co-produce their university experience. We now want to focus on how such an agenda can be put into practice in teaching and learning.

Our universities and colleges are full of excellent teachers and lecturers who are devoted the task of enlightening students, equipping them for bright futures. But staff and students are being held back, denied the space and the support to innovate, to challenge and to collaborate.

This document represents an attempt to focus our existing, and already hugely influential, partnership agenda on to teaching and learning. It is a collection of ideas about how the values of partnership can chart a radical course for education, one which embraces innovative and inclusive models of teaching and learning. It provides us with powerful ways of putting our most cherished educational values into practice.

I am deeply excited about where these thoughts will take us. And I am confident that by working together and taking up the radical cause as a positive, practical alternative to marketisation, we can change education, and society, for the better.

In unity,

Megan Dunn

Vice President (Higher Education)
NUS

Deconstructing the lecture

“Some people talk in their sleep. Lecturers talk while other people sleep.”

Albert Camus

Deconstructing the lecture

Is there something actually wrong with the lecture?

Current debates over the future of learning and teaching in higher education have often emerged out of a critique of traditional teaching methods. The lecture as an educational space is often at the centre of such a critique, because of its historical relationship with 'expositional teaching', where an "expert" stands at the front of the room and speaks to people, which is seen as an outdated and ineffective teaching method.

However, it is short-sighted to see this debate as a critique of the lecture *as such*. We shouldn't over-generalise. There is more to a lecture than simply transmitting information to "passive" students, and sometimes such forms of teaching are necessary, acting as a marker for students to organise their own learning around, and to complement seminars, study groups and other learning spaces. The symbolic position of the lecture in this debate has concealed a more systemic problem that runs through many aspects of the learning environment in our educational institutions.

The lecture is not merely the product of an ancient style of learning; its continued importance is also because it became a convenient method in an era of massification of learning. Pressure to include more people in higher education led to a rationalisation of learning spaces to meet the needs of a larger and more diverse audience. The lecture performed a utility function in a period of increased standardisation, relieving time and resource pressures on universities by teaching a large number of students in one single time and space.

Therefore, it is not that the lecture itself is a barrier to change, but rather the fact that it has become a central part of a standardised approach to mass teaching that remains prevalent in higher education and lacks the inspiration and inclusivity we need in a modern, democratic university.

The key issues in learning spaces

There are several key issues highlighted by the uniform model of the traditional learning space:

- 1) **Learning spaces and teaching methods are often geared towards surface learning**, meaning that the focus is on the memorising facts, rather than reflective understanding. This seems to contradict the general belief (and expectation of most lecturers) that students should be engaging in a deeper understanding of the content.
- 2) **The structure of learning is often authoritarian rather than democratic**. Often the ability of students to contribute - in that their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs can be made visible - is limited by the fact that the academic holds all of the power. Too much of the time the student can only play the role of the passive listener, and the teacher simply deposits facts.
- 3) **Lecturers and teachers are often constrained by standardised and over-bureaucratic processes**. Our critique is not of lecturers: we want to emancipate them, allow them to innovate, to work with students, learn from them, and make their role more interesting and rewarding. This means less rigidity

and centralisation in the way courses are structured and administered.

- 4) **Learning spaces reproduce existing inequalities rather than challenging them.** The unequal and undemocratic power relations in educational settings fail to account for social inequalities that affect the life chances of students and, in doing so, help to legitimise them. These issues are magnified by the continued remnants of elitism, nepotism, gender and ethnic inequality, and disciplinary rivalry within academia.
- 5) **Standardisation has led to unhelpful generalisations about students.** Teaching and learning practice and resources are designed for the generic image of the student and fail to take into account the diverse backgrounds and needs of students. There are also unhelpful assumptions that all students learn at the same rate and come to university with similar baskets of skills and knowledge.
- 6) **The measures of teaching quality are problematic.** The ways we measure quality have been constructed within a discourse of marketisation and performance measurement that is largely quantitative and target based and tell us very little about what and how much students are actually learning.

Is there an alternative?

So there are a number of areas that require attention, and we are seeing more and more work within the higher education sector to try and tackle these issues. A number of options will be explored in this

paper, but it is also worth noting that many of the alternative forms of teaching and learning have their own shortfalls. It is important that a more radical and inclusive learning environment must also strive to be more effective at developing knowledge and skills in students.

Take, for instance, the much discussed “problem-based” learning, which focuses on learning a subject through theoretical and practical experience of problem solving. While the approach has proven to be more inclusive and “student-driven”, it is also criticised for being too time-consuming and inefficient due to its over-demanding effect on students’ short-term memories.

There is also a big debate over the merits of research-led teaching. It is a large and diverse area of practice with many examples. It is also a politically-charged area because of the pressures on universities to balance research and teaching responsibilities. We acknowledge the fact that the place of research in radical and inclusive learning spaces is a key debate, but one that is too large to be dealt with here.

The next section will identify some of the key values that should underpin an inclusive learning environment and how they benefit students and wider society.

Questions to consider

1. *What types of engagement with lecturers and teachers do students consider most important?*
2. *What are the characteristics of teaching nominated for SLTAs?*
3. *What do academics think about the way they teach?*

Inclusivity in learning: values and beliefs

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Nelson Mandela

Inclusivity in learning: values and beliefs

What is “inclusivity”?

Cutting through all of the themes in the highly-charged debate about the student experience is the concept of inclusivity. We cannot move forward in higher education until we develop an academic culture designed to contest the social and economic inequalities that students experience in wider society and which continue to create an uneven student experience for students from different backgrounds.

Inclusivity not only means that teaching and learning takes account of students’ diverse backgrounds, but that we should be embracing this diversity by valuing and utilising the many different capabilities, expectations, aspirations and prior knowledge that students bring to their course, all of which will be culturally sensitive.

In short, we believe that the starting point for ensuring that everyone gets the most out of their study is to create learning environments which foster respect, empathy and the pursuit of cultural and political awareness.

Of course, inclusivity will also require structural changes to ensure that universities are committed to widening the diversity of their student body and removing barriers to access for underrepresented groups.

It also has to work for academics as well. Changes to pedagogy and learning spaces can only flourish in an academic workforce that is diverse and inclusive, where gender or ethnicity no longer affect opportunities and progression.

Inclusive education and social change

Embedding inclusivity in teaching and learning must lead us to the same conclusions as Karl Marx in his famous declaration: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” In other words, the development of our understanding of knowledge must address existing social problems in order for society to overcome them. And the first step in addressing these problems is to tackle social inequalities and privileges within the education system itself.

The belief that education can engage with and help solve real-world problems can be found embedded in the founding missions of many universities, and can be found among the pages of the Robbins Report, which led to the expansion of higher education in the 1960s.

But universities today appear to be stuck in a market-driven environment that has lost sight of these wider social aims in education. Beneath the veneer of the glossy marketing brochures and shiny new buildings is a growing need for radical change in the way students are taught and how they are able to meaningfully interact with their learning environments. The values that underpin radical and inclusive learning are at odds with the transactional view of education, where students are increasingly treated as consumers.

This was one of the key messages of our *Manifesto for Partnership*, which advocated a rejection of consumerism because it constructed the myth that students are empowered by market choice. Instead, it proposed a partnership between students

and staff, which 'is about investing students with the power to co-create not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself' (NUS 2012).

Thus, in order for universities to foster more inclusive learning environments, we believe that students must be empowered as active and participatory agents, not as mere consumers, so that they can articulate their own conceptions of what makes good learning environments, and work in partnership with academics and administrators to realise these conceptions.

In the next section, we will begin to look at some of the ways students can work in partnership with their institutions to build inclusive learning spaces, where a deeper and more rounded education can take place.

Questions to consider

1. *What are the values in your institution's mission statement?*
2. *How well do these values reflect "radical" and "inclusive" education?*
3. *What types of ideas and pressures could prevent your institution from adopting radical and inclusive values?*
4. *What good ideas and practices can students' unions share with institutions about tackling issues of diversity and inclusion?*

Transforming learning spaces

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Paulo Freire

Transforming learning spaces

Partnership and learning spaces

Partnership is a core dynamic of improving on the standardised model of teaching and learning, and tackling the issues raised earlier in our deconstruction of the lecture. Put simply, we cannot radically reimagine the student experience without forging an active partnership between students and teaching staff.

This section will focus on three key themes that we feel could act as foundation blocks to a new kind of radical and inclusive learning environment: transformative learning, radical pedagogy, and inclusive technology.

Transformative learning

Transformative learning refers to a style of adult education aimed at creating autonomous and responsible thinkers by encouraging learners to reflect on their own learning experience and challenge their underlying cultural assumptions and presuppositions in a safe environment.

The theory of transformative learning was developed in the 1990s by Jack Mezirow, a prominent American sociologist. He was influenced by the work of both Paulo Freire and Jurgen Habermas, who led him to believe that knowledge has an emancipatory dimension, which, in the right learning environments, can be used to empower people to break free from oppressive cultural and social relations.

The key to transformative learning is in creating a learning environment that allows individuals to become aware of the ideas, values and beliefs that influence the way in which they learn. By creating an environment for learners to challenge their assumptions, individuals build confidence and competence in taking on new ways of thinking and acting which they can adopt and explore in their everyday lives.

Getting learners to the point in which they begin to question and critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs requires certain conditions relating to the inclusivity of the learning space, namely:

- Freedom from coercion and the influences of power
- Equal opportunity to contribute, and equal chance to hear others
- Equal opportunity and safe space to question and challenge

According to Mezirow and other proponents of transformative learning, these conditions are achievable if the lecturer/teacher actively attempts to dissolve the uneven power relations between them and their students. This means finding ways to share power equally among the group.

It is equally important to find a common, shared language or “discourse” through which to effectively communicate. There are often difficulties in finding a fully inclusive discourse as language is cultural and the backgrounds of students will have a major impact on how they communicate. Transformative learning aims to overcome this by encouraging learners and the teacher to work together to reach an understanding of the meaning of ideas and concepts, rather than the teacher assuming control of the situation and enforcing a particular articulation of meaning.

Others, such as Robert Boyd, have suggested that transformative learning allows individuals to develop greater interdependent relationships with others and sharing a greater compassion for society. In order for this transformation to take place, individuals need to be confronted with a more personal and psychological reflection on their position in the world. This can be achieved by the

educator taking on the role of an experienced mentor, reflecting on their own learning journey to help others do the same, whilst facilitating the questioning of the students' perceptions of reality.

Questions to consider

1. *How do we ensure that transformative learning environments are inclusive to distance learners?*
2. *What kind of extra-curricular activities does / could your students' union offer to help students to share compassion for each other / society?*
3. *How can we encourage teachers to share their power without making them feel that their role is diminished?*

Radical Pedagogy

The discussion around radical pedagogy should begin with Paulo Freire. His work on "critical pedagogy" has been highly influential in educational theory.

Freire believes that education is never an objective venture; it is either used by the dominant group in society to legitimise their values and their position, or it is used as a tool of liberation, giving people the chance to think critically about the way things are and to change society for the better.

In agreement with the critique of the traditional model of education described in the first section, Freire rejects the idea that a student should be treated as an empty vessel for the teacher to "deposit" knowledge into. Freire believes that this model presupposes an unequal power relation that is used to control what learners think and do.

In contrast, critical pedagogy is about connecting knowledge with power and social awareness, allowing learners to

develop political agency and use what they have learned to challenge and innovate. This educational process is known as *praxis*.

One area in which we have seen considerable progress in creating a radical pedagogy is in gender studies and feminist teaching. Feminist teachers have constructed their own critical pedagogy in order to embed feminist theory into the practice of teaching feminism, creating a more critical and inclusive learning environment.

Feminist pedagogies tend to involve several stages in the learning process. The process begins with practices that encourage the participation of learners in identifying inequalities or "privileges" and expressing their personal experiences of them. This is followed by the development of critical engagement with the issues, including the awareness of "positionality" (Maher & Tetreault 1994; Maher 2008): the idea that people's values and beliefs are relational and subject to change (which was explained in the discussion of transformative learning above). Learners are then encouraged to validate and frame personal experiences in theories and wider social contexts. The process is concluded when learners are supported in connecting all of this to their individual and collective role in social change.

The reason why feminist pedagogy is so useful in building an inclusive learning space is that it is designed to challenge *all* inequalities, not only that of gender. One of the key issues in feminist teaching has been to understand the relationship between gender, race, class, sexuality and other forms of discrimination that go otherwise unchallenged in traditional modes of teaching and learning.

We can learn a lot from feminist teachers, and there is no reason why the radical pedagogical practices championed by them

cannot be used in all sorts of educational settings. Indeed, another key element of feminist pedagogy is its ability to transfer power within the classroom by identifying the teacher's privileges, and allowing them to deconstruct their own position of power. The approach has been used by white, heterosexual men who teach in order to openly examine their own privilege and create a positive and safe environment for the expression of learner voices.

Questions to consider

1. *Could students' unions use radical pedagogies to tackle "lad culture" at university?*
2. *How can students' unions seek out and support academics that use or are interested in using a radical approach?*
3. *What if students don't want to be engaged? Can students still be passive in an inclusive learning space?*
4. *What are the boundaries and tensions associated with inclusive spaces?*

Inclusive Technology

It's rather cliché to say that technology is transforming the way we interact with and communicate knowledge and ideas. But it is not the technology in itself that is transforming education and society; it is, rather, the creative ways in which people are using technology to educate and drive change.

Building on the assumptions of transformative learning that innovation and creativity can be learned and practiced, technology is a powerful medium through which such "habits of mind" can be developed.

In particular, we can see many exciting ways in which technology can communicate information in interesting new forms. It can also be an important

source of interaction between students for peer-to-peer learning in which the lecturer can also be an active facilitator, as well as a medium to share instant thoughts and feedback in a constructive and democratic manner.

Of course there are both benefits and risks associated with the use of technology in learning spaces. In terms of the learning environment, there are concerns that more widespread use of tablets and smart phones in lectures and classes could lead to distractions and discourage group participation. However, this shouldn't be the case if the learning space is inclusive and stimulating. Students are distracted when they are not engaged in their learning; where technology enhances their engagement, such distraction should be minimal.

Wider concerns focus on the challenges that online resources and learning spaces have on the physical role of academic staff and their intellectual property rights. We are moving towards a more open access environment, where access to research and teaching is more egalitarian, but also more open to abuse by market forces. The growth of Massive Open Online Courses is a particular example of this, where the potential benefits of open and mobile access to learning resources could be marred by the profiteering of private providers or by the unfair exploitation of academic labour.

The issues with technology in learning are all associated with why and how technology is used. If we stick to the principles of inclusive learning, we can ensure that technology plays an enhancing role for both student and lecturer.

Questions to consider

1. *What support and training is necessary to ensure students and staff can use new technologies effectively?*
2. *How can we ensure that technology enhances learning and does not become a distraction instead?*
3. *What are the main fears or students and staff about using technology?*
4. *Can your students' union share examples of good practice on how students use technology to enhance their learning experience?*

Summary

We believe that the following points can help us forge a deeper understanding of how a learning space can be constructed on the basis of a radically inclusive partnership.

The central ideas of how such a partnership can work are:

- Accepting that education is never a neutral space.
- Removing the unequal power relationship between teacher and student.
- Providing a safe space to explore the different backgrounds and needs of students, and using this to challenge exclusionary practices.
- Incorporating real world experiences and problem-solving into learning.
- Using technology to develop inclusivity and innovation.

A radical approach to measuring quality

“Assuring quality through competition for students obscures a quality enhancement approach that emphasises teacher development and student engagement, which our findings suggest are more likely to result in high quality learning outcomes.”

Paul Ashwin *et al* – ‘Quality and Inequality in Undergraduate Courses’

A radical approach to measuring quality

How will we know students are learning?

The current approach to quality assurance and assessment was not designed to measure the quality of radical, inclusive learning. This means that we need to find a new way of assessing both the inclusivity of spaces, whilst also continuing to ensure that they are productive and get the best out of students.

Inclusivity does not necessarily mean that students are being equipped with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for the world post-graduation. It's also safe to say that just because students enjoy a course, or a module, or a lecture, does not mean that they are actually learning anything. There will undoubtedly be some spaces that are inclusive, but ineffective at enhancing knowledge and skills. Conversely, there are spaces that provide very good learning opportunities for some, but not for all, thus failing the test of inclusivity.

What is "quality"?

Quality is a social construct: its meaning is formed in debates around what is of value and how that value can be measured. These debates around value judgements are heavily context dependent, meaning that they represent what "quality" means at that specific point in time.

Our current system of quality assurance in higher education is very much a product of the dominant set of political discourses around marketisation and modernisation, in which there is an emphasis on customer satisfaction, setting quantifiable targets and standards, and performance management.

It is likely, however, that this system will change, following the recent announcement by HEFCE that they intend to move to a public procurement process to decide on quality assurance in higher education after 2015. But this also brings the danger of the process being completely privatised and, therefore, out of democratic control.

A partnership approach to quality

As we have already mentioned, radical and inclusive teaching and learning aims to break free of the current constraints of a consumer-focused, marketised higher education system. It therefore also needs a definition of quality, and a framework for quality assessment, that is based on the values and beliefs that underpin the partnership agenda.

This doesn't necessarily mean ditching all of the current measures of quality. But there must be an acceptance that measures like student retention, degree attainment, employability, and student satisfaction do not necessarily tell us about what students are actually learning and are affected by a whole range of factors that unrelated to the learning on a course.

Moreover, as Graham Gibbs (2010) has suggested, when we do attempt to quantify measures of quality, we must aim to contextualise them in a broader analysis of multiple variables, rather than attempting to make causal links between one factor and another in complete isolation.

But there is clearly room for a more hybrid method, bringing in more qualitative measures of quality of a more formative structure, monitoring the perpetual development of students and engaging

them in a dynamic process of reflection on the quality of their course.

A good example of this will be in finding innovative ways to measure and improve the quality of assessment and feedback in higher education. NUS has put together a toolkit setting out the principles of effective feedback and assessment, and steps to develop an outstanding “partnership” approach.

The toolkit highlights the need for students to be empowered and given the tools and support to co-design quality practice in their institution and turn feedback into a powerful driver for personal development throughout a course, rather than an over-standardised process that alienates the student from their learning.

The lesson is that the quality of teaching practices like assessment and feedback can be measured by utilising the same partnership practices designed to improve them. By getting students engaged in a meaningful process of co-designing and co-developing assessment and feedback, they are always already engaged in, and co-responsible for, the quality of the process.

A future system of measuring quality is, therefore, inseparable from the development of partnership and inclusivity. In order to be truly radical and inclusive, we must embed quality assurance into teaching and learning itself, rather than over-relying on quantitative measures and the intervention of external bodies.

Questions to consider

1. *What role should a students’ union play in a future framework of quality assessment?*
2. *Which measures that are currently used to measure quality should remain in a new system, and which should not?*
3. *What new measures can we look to add in?*
4. *How can we better understand the relationship between teaching quality and the quality of the student experience?*
5. *Should we be measuring the impact a university has on society?*

Conclusion

Summary

This paper has set out the key thoughts and ideas which underpin our work on radical and inclusive teaching and learning.

We have aimed to highlight approaches that could embed our existing work on partnership into new learning environments where students and academics interact and co-produce in new and exciting ways.

It was important to begin by discussing some of the shortfalls of traditional modes of teaching and learning, but also by emphasising that the critical focus on the lecture has concealed wider issues, of which the prevalence of the lecture is a symptom rather than the problem itself.

We have set out the key values which underpin our understanding of education. We believe that in order to produce a fully inclusive learning space, education must exist to challenge social inequalities and aim to find solutions to them in the real world.

From this starting point, we have identified three particular areas that can build on the partnership agenda: transformative learning, radical pedagogy, and inclusive technology.

We have also identified some of the challenges associated with measuring quality in these new learning spaces. We believe that it is only through internalising quality assurance into the partnership agenda itself, allowing students and their unions to be active participants in the development of a quality education system, rather than mere passive consumers.

All of this work stands in opposition to the continuing logic of marketisation in education, one which is central to the ideology of the current government. We believe that the future of higher education depends on partnership and collaboration, not markets and competition.

Putting our thoughts into practice

This initial work marks the beginning of an 18 month project that will involve students' unions across the country.

We have identified a number of students' unions to conduct pilot projects of radical community spaces on their campuses.

These unions will come together in November to discuss moving forward, with a plan and budget agreed in December to launch projects in January 2015.

Projects will run for six months and be evaluated in June 2015.

We are also running three radical education groups to lead on our work on inclusive practice in teaching and learning. These groups will agree on a project plan to work on throughout the first half of 2015, to be evaluated in the summer.

Getting involved

There is a chance that we will be running more of these projects throughout the course of next year. If you want to know more about this work, or wish to get involved, you can contact Sarah Kerton (sarah.kerton@nus.org.uk).

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