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**Early intervention: the impact on future
student participation and engagement in
classroom environments**

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Abstract

Existing literature shows students agree that active participation in the classroom is important and many want to engage. However, only one third regularly do so and previous studies have suggested that the vast majority of contributions in class may be made by a handful of students. The aim of this research was to explore from the student's perspective what they considered were the key barriers to actively participating in the classroom and to establish whether early intervention can have an impact on their participation. Initial findings revealed that a significant number of students have benefited from the intervention, however, the majority still experience difficulties participating in lectures. Responses indicated that for some students active participation is potentially negative especially for non-traditional and minority students. Traditional informal approaches to encouraging student participation through socialisation have been unsystematic and haphazard and their inadequacies and shortfalls have been highlighted by increasingly larger student groups and widening participation.

Keywords

Active classroom participation; student engagement; minority students; enhancing student learning.

Introduction

Since 1992 widening participation in higher education has significantly increased student diversity in a complex number of ways. There have been changes in the social class, ethnicity, first language of students and wide differences in the levels of learning styles and inherent cultural capital¹ (Johnson, 2010:8). Skills and attitudes, that were previously considered basic to undergraduate studying now require varying levels of transitional support, especially in institutions which prepare students for professions that were previously typified by a 'training' regime (such as public sectors roles) (ibid:6). Enabling the development of graduates to become self-aware learners and reflective professionals is now a key responsibility in higher education teaching. Many first- years students arrive at university viewing learning in a passive way where they receive and repeat knowledge given to them by a lecturer. Students need to be supported to modify this perception and develop into active and resourceful participants in the learning journey (Collins & Lim, 2002).

Benefits of Participation in Lectures

Research has shown that there are convincing reasons to encourage and support student participation in the classroom (Weaver & Qi, 2005; Petress, 2006). It can stimulate student's motivation, improve depth of learning and help them become more critical in their thinking

¹ Cultural capital- social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Linked to class location, aspirations, involvement in higher cultural pursuits, lifestyle and extra curricular activities (Giddens 2001:276)

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(Garside, 1996; Dagget, 1997; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Greater participation encourages higher levels of thinking, which promote skills such as analysis, synthesis and interpretation (Rocca, 2010). Students also showed improved communication skills and an enhanced ability to interact within a group (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). Fritschner (2000) found that students believed that participation was vital to their learning and Handelsman et al. (2005) reported that as students began to participate more in the classroom their grades also increased.

Defining Participation

Participation and engagement in seminars and lectures can be defined in a number of different ways. Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) describe participation as a process of active engagement involving; 'preparation, contribution to discussion, group skills, communication skills and attendance' (cited in Rocca, 2010:87). Burchfield and Sappington (1999:290) highlight 'the number of unsolicited responses volunteered' in class, whereas Wade (1994) believes the 'ideal class discussion' is where all the students participate and are interested in the topic and listen to others comments and suggestions. Rotgans and Schmidt focus on levels of cognitive participation and engagement in class and define it as a 'psychological state in which students put in a lot of effort to truly understand a topic and in which students persist studying over a long period of time' (2011:465). In other words, how willing are they to participate and invest in a task and how long will they persist with it. Rotgans and Schmidt suggest that cognitive participation depends on the type of task that is set because the nature of the task will determine the level of student engagement and participation. They state that activities such as working in a group, engaging in discussions, or listening to a lecture are likely 'to result in different levels of cognitive engagement' (ibid:467). They postulate that listening to a lecture is the least cognitively engaging and that working in groups and engaging in discussions the most. They are particularly interested in the levels of student autonomy and claim that the more autonomous a student feels the greater they will participate.

Although evidence demonstrates that students do see participation as important and many students report that they want to engage and participate more than they do, multiple research shows that the reality is only a minority regularly do participate in the classroom (Crombie et al. 2003; Frischner, 2000; Howard & Henney, 1998). According to Howard and Henney (1998) only one third regularly participate and 90% of all participations are made by a handful of students. This research has an important bearing on this study as the author's experience concurs with these findings. Only a small number of students, approximately 4- 6 in a cohort of 49 participated in classroom discussions and asked questions. Extant research highlights some of the reasons why students do or do not participate in class/lectures, the two key barriers being lack of the size of the group and lack of confidence (Wade, 1994; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005).

Class Size

Multiple researches show that larger classes greatly inhibit participation (Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Myers et al. 2009; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Austin and MacRone (1994) and Crombie et al. (2003) found that classes with approx. 10 students showed the most participation whereas those with more than 40 students showed the least. Weaver and Qi (2005) point out that a significant amount of lecturing occurs in large groups, which reduces participatory opportunities for students. As larger cohorts are not something lecturers can eradicate we need to find the tools to promote and encourage participation and combat the barriers inherent in large student groups. These can range from meeting for smaller weekly sessions, dividing a large class into smaller groups and tactics to try and make lecture theatres feel smaller. The author was able on one occasion only, to reduce the class in half and double

teach with support from a colleague and there was an increase in student engagement. To overcome the problem of theatre style rows and column seating which discourages participation lecturers can also move about within the cohort as being in closer proximity to students can psychologically reduce the feeling of a large space (Gleason, 1986; Fritschner, 2000). Semicircles or U shape tables is a more conducive setting and encourages discussions but impossible to achieve with fixed rows in a large lecture theatre (Fassinger, 2000; Fritschner, 2000). Dallimore et al. (2004) also explore how asking student's direct questions, or mandatory participation, can be an effective practice to encourage discussion, and although Moguel (2004) did report some negative responses to this approach, it was in the minority of cases.

Confidence

Confidence and classroom apprehension is a significant barrier to class participation. Regardless of the logistics of the room many students simply feel too inadequate or intimidated in front of other students and the lecturers to participate (Fritschner, 2000, Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Being nervous and apprehensive about speaking out is a common problem in students and research shows that approx. 60% of students will not participate due to this (Bowers, 1986). Wade (1994) found that if students are led to believe their ideas are important they are more likely to contribute and Neer and Kircher (1989) reported that the more knowledgeable students become about the subject and the better they get to know their fellow students the more likely they are to participate. Gaining knowledge to counteract apprehension can be prompted by setting readings and encouraging the students to do advanced preparation (Fassinger, 1995a; Wade, 1994). Various methods such as setting research tasks, finding key points from a reading, preparing a debate or presentations in small groups can all help to enhance confidence and dissipate apprehension in students (Cohen, 1991; Hyde & Ruth, 2002). Weaver and Qi (2005) report how young, immature and less experienced students can gain confidence from these approaches. However, despite instigating and activating many of these strategies the author still encountered reluctance and unwillingness in the majority of the students to participate in these tasks. This research was undertaken in an attempt to understand from the student's perspective what the key barriers were that prevented them from actively participating in seminars and lectures

Method

Action research is undertaken by practitioners for the aim of developing their practice and it is carried out at the same time as it is being performed. The key aim is to solve a problem and implement a change. By adopting a critical and reflective standpoint and a continuous cycle of reflection and revision it involves practitioners asking probing questions of their own practice to influence and implement social change (Thomas, 2013:146). It aims to generate new knowledge, achieve action-orientated outcomes, educate researchers and participants and be implemented in a local setting (McNiff, 2014:14). The research aim lends itself to a more qualitative, constructivist and inductive approach because the aim of was to gather the student's impressions, thoughts, feelings and motivations. These factors relate to issues and phenomena that cannot easily be observed or researched in a more quantitative way. Of course all meanings are subject to underlying assumptions about what counts as 'meaning' but at the heart of the qualitative approach is a 'naturalistic, interpretative philosophy' (Fosey, 2012 cited in Punch & Oancea, 2014:182). Therefore, focus groups or interviews would have produced richer data but were not practicable to arrange for such a large cohort, due to time constraints on the researcher and the students. Therefore, a mixed- method questionnaire presented as the most effective method under the circumstances. This type of questionnaire gathers a large amount of data in a short space of

time and is a versatile tool (Denscombe, 2007; Churton & Brown, 2010). The structured questions produce findings that can be expressed quantitatively and the space for comments allows for qualitative interpretation and clarification (Thomas, 2013:207). The questions were influenced and informed from the body of research and literature as previously discussed.

Setting and Context

The origins and rationale for this research stem from the authors experiences with a large cohort of first-year students, in a big lecture theatre where lack of participation in the lectures was presenting a number of pedagogical challenges. Attempts to encourage the students to participate in the sessions were met with continued reluctance and lack of engagement. The timetabled lecture ran for four hours and pre-planned debates, group work and discussions were severely hampered and curtailed due to the near absence of involvement by the students.

Participants

The first phase of the research was carried out with forty-nine first- year students in the last month of semester two during a scheduled lecture. The research spanned seven months and the findings from the first phase informed and influenced the second phase, (implementation of the change) and the findings from the third phase were evaluated to see how effective the change had been.

Data Collection

Anonymous quantitative and qualitative (mixed method) style questionnaires were used. Before the participants were asked to complete the questionnaires the author explained what the research entailed and assured them the questionnaires would remain anonymous. To achieve this the students completed the consent forms separately and they were placed in an envelope by the students and sealed at the end. It was made clear to the students that they did not have to complete the questionnaire and they could withdraw at any time. The completed questionnaires were also placed in a sealed envelope and the consent forms stored with another tutor. The researcher did not leave the room but retired behind the lectern and faced away from the students. These measures were taken as it was crucial to the credibility and honesty of the data that the students were confident their answers were anonymous to try and hence avoid 'prestige bias'. (Thomas, 2013:208). This is where the respondents assumes that there is a 'right answer', for example, if they believe the tutor may try and match handwriting from a consent form to a questionnaire or the presence of the tutor in the room it may impact on their responses (ibid). It is therefore not enough just to state that the questionnaires will be anonymous but to be explicit as to how that will be achieve.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by examining all the responses given to all the questions by one respondent at a time. This method is more likely to provide a complete picture of the responses and enabled the author to conduct a content analysis and identify common themes, 'problems speaking out', big lecture, group to large and so on (see Figure 1.). These were then thematically coded and counted for frequency (Kumar, 2012:256).

Pre-Intervention Data

The findings correspond very closely with the extant research. Out of 49 students over half (27) stated they did have problem speaking out in lectures and reasons for this ranged from the group being too large, being laughed at, looking foolish, and not knowing the other

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students. A handful (5) gave mixed responses indicating that it would depend on other factors (if they were sure of answer for e.g.) as to whether they would speak up.

49 - 1st Year Students		
Questions	Quantitative data	Qualitative Data
Q1. Do you find it difficult to speak out to either answer or ask questions on lectures?	27 did have problems speaking out 5 mixed replies →	<i>'in smaller groups'</i> <i>'if I am asked directly'</i> <i>"I don't like being asked directly"</i>
Q2. If you do, why is this? – (e.g.: Too shy/lack of confidence/worried people may laugh or be hostile/worried you may get it wrong/big lecture theatre...any other reason?)	Big Lecture -3 Group too large- 5 Others might shout me down -2 Others might laugh at me - 6 Worried answer is wrong/silly/stupid – 19 Don't know many people – 8 Lack of confidence -14	<i>'Asking a silly question'</i> <i>'Difficult to be first person to speak'</i> <i>'If I am confident about the answer'</i> <i>'Don't know how to word answers'</i> <i>'in case others laugh'</i> <i>'looked down on if I get answer wrong'</i> <i>'sometimes I get scared'</i> <i>'don't know everybody'</i>
Q3. If you do find it easy to ask questions/answer questions - why is this	17 stated they had no problems speaking	<i>'I am older and not bothered what people think'</i> <i>'happy to speak'</i> <i>'there is a friendly atmosphere'</i> <i>'confident and curious'</i> <i>'only way of learning'</i> <i>'easy to ask questions'</i>
Q4. How well do you know the rest of the cohort? (How many students you know and communicate with group) Under 10 Under 20 Under 30 40 +	Under 10 -21 Under 20-19 Under 30- 11 40+ 8	
Q5. Do you feel that knowing the rest of the cohort better would give students confidence to speak out in lectures? ...If you do...why?	39 stated that it would help 2- no difference	<i>'more comfortable and relaxed'</i> <i>'easier to speak out'</i> <i>'won't be embarrassed'</i> <i>'people won't feel stupid and not worry about being judged'</i> <i>'people won't be scared to ask out or help friends'</i>
Q6. What type of activities do you think encourage students to get to know each other?	Social Activities/parties/pub-9 Group work/team building -43 Problem solving -6 Ice Breakers - 4	
Q7. What type of activities do you think encourage students to engage more in lectures? (Examples: group work/researching and presenting findings/case studies/role play/worksheets/debates)	Group Work -46 Role Play -16 Case Studies – 11 Debates – 24 Presenting research – 25 Split up from friends -2 Seminar type lectures – 2 Work sheets- 2	

Figure 1. Pre- Intervention Questionnaire Data.

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Lack of confidence varying levels of classroom apprehension are reported from 32 out of the 49 students. For example:

Asking a silly question

Difficult to be first person to speak

If I am confident about the answer

Don't know how to word answers

in case others laugh

looked down on if I get answer wrong

Although only 8 reported that not knowing other students was a barrier in Q2, 39 of them felt that knowing the rest of the cohort well would increase classroom confidence. Interestingly 17 students reported having no problems speaking out or participating in class. This finding is in stark contrast to the author's experience with the group where rarely did more than 5 students participate. Analysis of this miss match is a challenge – either these answers were not truthful and the issue of 'prestige bias' prevailed with some students or despite having no issues about speaking in class they simply chose not to.

Tellingly, in answer to Q6 regarding which activities would encourage participation one student noted:

We already do all of these and it doesn't help. I personally think its too late for any of us to make new friends within the group as everyone already has their little 'clicks' and therefore making it difficult to talk to others

Implementation of Change

Therefore, to determine whether early intervention could have an impact on future student participation and engagement in classroom environments during Welcome Week the author ran a two-hour introductory lecture. There were approximately 55 students and the age profile of the students ranged between 18-21. The activities were designed to introduce new students to the lecture/seminar format and a short lecture on 'Binge Drinking' supported by Power Point slides was delivered. The students were then organised into small groups with a series of set tasks to complete and feedback. Before the tasks they were asked to introduce themselves to each other and spend five minutes talking. The tasks comprised of questions on 'binge drinking' as a social phenomenon and examples were provided to get students thinking. Two other staff was engaged to circulate and assist with the 'buzz groups'. The task was designed to both introduce students to a relevant topic within criminology (one from a topic they likely had some prior knowledge of) and encourage the students to talk to each other. They were required to feedback information and ideas and enter into a wider discussion. There was a very positive reaction from the students with a significant number participating and engaging in discussions and some staying back after the session to give affirmative verbal feedback.

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	Peer Feedback Observation of Teaching	Areas of Good Practice:
Peer 1	<p>Group discussions centered around behavioural norms amongst young people and students in particular during fresher's week.</p> <p>In the small groups I observed issues such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gender issues: is binge drinking solely a male activity – who can drink the most and remain standing - female behaviour mimicking male counterparts – gendered assumptions challenged - group members reflecting on their own experiences - binge drinking as a social activity: fitting-in and being accepted as part of a group - culture of binge drinking amongst the student population - techniques of neutralisation (Sykes & Matza,1957) employed to justify and explain behaviour: 'everyone does it', 'all students binge drink during fresher's week', 'it's expected', 'it's part of student life'. - the students introduced themselves to other members of the group - the sharing of common experiences 	<p>Well planned and researched. Subject matter relevant to the audience Active engagement with the debates Collected and summarised key points from the group feedback</p>
Peer 2	<p>Students readily engaged with the task and the following ranges of issues were fed back.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Issues • Challenges to gender stereotypes of women and alcohol • Age related drinking • Media representations of images of young people • Student attitudes and cultures of drinking • Health related issues • Policy making • Costs to tax payers and political view 	<p>My observations were that this was a well designed and produced lecture on a subject clearly of interest and one that students engaged with immediately. It had a strong and positive impact generating lively discussion in the buzz groups and extensive debate when fed back to the whole group. It was a high impact session. It was expertly managed by the lecturer</p>

Figure 2. Peer Feedback.

Post Intervention findings.

The third phase was carried out with forty-four 1st year students from the Welcome Week Cohort in similar environment to phase 1 (lecture theatre during scheduled lecture and with same ethical discussion and procedures) during their third month of study. The author taught this group for six hours a week (two hourly sessions). The questionnaire was identical apart from an extra question about the Welcome Week Session.

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Q1.	17 did have problems 8 'sometimes' →	<i>'If I'm unsure of an answer I'm hesitant'</i> <i>""t times feels intimidating'</i> <i>'okay with short answers'</i> <i>'depends on topics and who is present in the room'</i> <i>'in small groups – comfortable'</i>
Q2.	Big Lecture Room – 7 Lack Confidence – 17 Worried answer is wrong/silly/stupid – 15 Not Knowing People -2	<i>'lack of confidence, too shy and worried about what people'</i> <i>'might get it wrong /big lecture theatre'</i> <i>'lack of confidence, anxiety. Intimidating in front of a large class'</i> <i>'worried individuals will laugh'</i> <i>'question sound stupid to lecturer'</i> <i>'open environment and welcoming lecturers'</i>
Q3.	16 – no problems speaking out	<i>'I enjoy contributing to a discussion but only if I have something worth saying'</i> <i>'feel like I learn more if I speak out'</i> <i>'lecture allows for questions and answers'</i> <i>'Lecturers invite questions to be asked – quite welcoming atmosphere'</i> <i>'I feel comfortable within myself and lecturer in class'</i> <i>'my own personal learning is more important than someone laughing at me'</i> <i>'being older I'm more confident'</i>
Q4.	Under 10 → 24 Under 20 → 20	
Q5.	22 stated it would help 15 stated it would not 5 said 'maybe'	<i>'the more people you know, the more confident you feel to speak'</i> <i>'yes, because everyone is usually thinking same thing'</i> <i>'less intimidating'</i> <i>'would feel like I wouldn't be laughed at'</i> <i>'not be judged'</i> <i>'people will be more relaxed'</i> <i>'yes, for some people'</i>
Q6.	Social Activities – 11 Group Work – 20 Debates – 3 Icebreakers – 10 Unsure - 4	<i>'I hate icebreakers'</i> <i>'not icebreakers – they are awkward'</i> <i>'ice breakers are bad'</i> <i>'no forced discussions, makes people talk less'</i> <i>'more ice breakers from beginning'</i>
Q7.	Group Work - 26 Role Play - 8 Case Studies – 10 Debates – 16 Presenting research – 6 Work sheets- 1 Problem Solving-1	<i>'debates if I know the people'</i> <i>'breaking class into groups, then splitting groups into pairs to do research to present back to the group'</i> <i>'group research before lecture'</i> <i>'debates can be controlled and a great way for people to bring views forward'</i> <i>'split group debates'</i> <i>'I hate group work as majority of people never engage in it'</i>
Q8. If you attended the Binge Drinking discussion session in Welcome Week – please give some feedback about it. Did you find it interesting? (If so why? if not- say why ?)	35 out of 44 participants had attended session. 28 had found it interesting/relevant and beneficial → 7 did not or had mixed feelings →	<i>'yes, it was a good little insight into a topic in the subject'</i> <i>'yes. it was very interesting and although I don't really drink it was informative and enjoyable'</i> <i>'interesting start to get to know people'</i> <i>'yes, the most interesting /beneficial activity of the welcome week'</i> <i>'there were lots of debates surrounding the subject'</i> <i>'interesting as it's a current issue, therefore learning about contemporary issues'</i> <i>'it was interesting'</i> <i>'interesting and relevant'</i> <i>'good way to engage everybody'</i> <i>'good to hear different points of view & opinions'</i> <i>'it was a relevant subject but a topic'</i> <i>'nope, already been told this for past few years'</i> <i>'already studied in college'</i> <i>'not a lot of group involvement'</i> <i>'good introduction but the room a bit overwhelming'</i> <i>'helped debating with people you didn't know'</i>

Figure 3. Questionnaire Data – Third Phase.

Discussion of Findings

Out of the thirty-five students who had attended the welcome week session 28 of them had reacted positively and had found it beneficial. For example:

Yes, it was a good little insight into a topic in the subject

Yes, it was very interesting and although I don't really drink it was informative and enjoyable

Interesting start to get to know people

Yes, the most interesting /beneficial activity of the welcome week

There were lots of debates surrounding the subject

Interesting as it's a current issue, therefore learning about contemporary issues

Interesting and relevant

Good way to engage everybody

However, the findings of Q1-7 during phase 3 of the research are very similar to the findings from phase 1 and the extant literature. Many of the comments are comparable with lack of confidence and varying levels of classroom apprehension reported. For example;

Lack of confidence, too shy and worried about what people

Might get it wrong /big lecture theatre

Lack of confidence, anxiety"

Intimidating in front of a large class

Worried individuals will laugh

Sound stupid to lecturer

In response to Q2 only 2 students felt that knowing the others would help break down barriers and in response to Q5 22 stated that knowing other members of the cohort would be helpful. However, 15 stated it would make no difference with 5 'maybes'. Since the welcome week session this cohort had been exposed to more 'ice breakers' and small group work in the modules (which included regularly mixing up the groups) and their level of participation and engagement in lectures was significantly higher than the phase 1 group. As a cohort by the third month 24 of them knew up to 10 people and 20 knew up to 20. Although 'cliques' had formed the level of assimilation and integration was developing and progressing well. However, there was still only a minority that regularly participated – approx. 8-10 students (although 16 stated they had no problems) and the majority still found it difficult (Fritscher, 2000; Crombie et al. 2003). It was interesting to note that a number of students believed that actually knowing their peers better was in itself a barrier and they would feel as equally judged.

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It must be borne in mind that the phase one students had completed two semesters with each other by the time the research was carried, whereas the phase three students had only been together for three months. Thomas (2013:147) states it is vital to adopt a critical and reflective standpoint and a continuous cycle of reflection and revision throughout practitioner based research. Therefore, a repeat of the research would establish how successful the change implemented in welcome week had actually been.

However, from the author's perspective the levels of participation and engagement in lectures since the welcome week session had enabled a number of lively and pertinent debates and discussions to occur during the first three months of the semester. Pedagogically the teaching was much more student focused, less didactic and a significant number of the students were showing signs of becoming independent and autonomous learners (Weaver & Qi, 2005). The early signs are that the intervention carried out during welcome week has had an impact on the levels of student engagement and participation in lectures.

There is no doubt that for a significant number of students encouraging increased participation and class discussion is a positive aim however a number of responses in the research gave the author pause for thought and suggested the need to undertake further secondary research:

Some people just don't want to talk

No, doesn't change anxiety

No, even if you know them still be hard to talk out.

A number of studies reveal that not all students are, or become, adept at class participation and not all of them want to participate (Jones, 2008). This can be due to personal choice, cultural or linguistic factors or they simply struggle to engage in the academic discourse typical of higher education classroom discussions. Strambler and Weinstein (2010) argue that the adverse effect of perpetually trying to foster whole class participation has been overlooked. High levels of participation can have minimal effect on some students and can in fact obfuscate and even unsettle learning for them. White states that educators must recognise that 'a failure to participate does not necessarily reflect disrespect for the teacher or the class, a disinterest in the subject matter, or apathy in general' (2011). He further argues that lecturers and educators must stay alert to the fact that continually pressuring or 'assertively encouraging' students to participate in class may unfavorably impact on some groups of students and may in effect silence minority voices (White, 2007; 2011). International students in particular can struggle to overcome cultural and language barriers. Teachers must be aware that a 'one-size-fits-all' notion of good teaching cannot exist and 'we must be careful not 'replace one orthodoxy with yet another' (Pratt, 2002:5).

Conclusion

The findings of this study have implications both for teaching practice and further research. The early findings from this research demonstrate that implementing early intervention strategies does have a positive impact on future participation in classroom environments for some students but not all. However, the overall findings do concur with the extant research that only one third of students regularly participate and 90% of all participations are made by a handful of students (Howard & Henney, 1998). Barriers such as large lecture theatres, big groups and varying levels of classroom apprehension are problems that are inherently

difficult for educators to overcome for each individual student and as the findings demonstrate a significant number may actually be harmed by an indiscriminate approach that urges participation.

It is essential that as educators we are cautious not to wholly absorb the class discussion/participation pedagogical paradigm as a panacea for enhancing student learning. That is a challenge for tutors, especially in widening participation institutions, where any transmissive/didactic styles of teaching are fervently discouraged, (Biggs & Tang, 2011). It is also difficult in a milieu where increasing student diversity and widening participation are institutional and governmental goals (Gov.UK, 2012) and perceived as 'vital for social justice and economic competitiveness' (HEFKE, nd).

Attempting to understand all the variables that foster and /or inhibit student participation is a challenge for researchers. There is criticism of previous research that has pointed to the range of differing methods and variables that can make across-study comparisons difficult (Rocca, 2010:204). Questionnaires in particular can be problematical because observed participation is not always the same as self-reported participation (Fritschner, 2000). Note this study finding from both groups that report significant high number stating they have 'no problems' speaking out, whilst the reality is only a handful regularly do. Despite these limitations there are dominant themes throughout all the research and researchers must not be dissuaded from pursuing participant research in this area.

One of the areas not explored in this research was the impact of the tutor on the classroom environment – although some participant responses did refer to the influence of the lecturers. Creating a supportive classroom is yet another set of challenges facing educators in an ever- increasing focus on widening participation. Student diversity is critically important to supporting a 'dynamic developing ecology' and 'universities should be places that encourage questioning, critiquing, creating new knowledge and moving society forward' (Wareham, nd:5). Encouraging and promoting questioning and critiquing by the students in the classroom needs to take account of a wide range of variables and student requirements.

This has been a limited small –scale study but the findings suggest that future work is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the reasons why students do or do not participate in lectures. The author recognises that this study is limited, being based on 93 students from two first year cohorts in the same university. The author was also the same tutor throughout so it cannot be discounted that the student's responses were influenced by the dynamics of the student-tutor relationship (Thomas, 2013). There is scope for further replication studies to confirm the findings of this study. Gathering further data, preferably via focus groups or interviews with the phase three students at the end of semester two will provide more evidence as to what proportion of the first-year students have increased their participation due to the early intervention strategies employed by the author. On-going practitioner action-based research is an invaluable method to gather data that enables evidence –based judgments to be made in how educators carry out and evaluate their educational responsibility for enabling their students to become self-aware and reflective learners.

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