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'Why are we doing this if there's no connection?' The importance of prior experience in academic learning on a Master's programme

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ABSTRACT

Personal approaches to learning in Higher Education are acknowledged to offer an engaging and motivating approach to learning. This article argues that they can also enable students to learn more effectively, and apply this learning to their professional lives. Previous research has suggested that three of the most difficult facets of Master's level study for students are abstract thinking, unpredictability, and research skills. This practitioner study found that drawing on students' prior personal and professional experience is an effective way to develop these skills, because it provides the necessary contextualisation for learning. Interview data from one diverse cohort on a Master's in Education programme show that the students believed that this approach improved their understanding of these three areas, and their ability to use formal assignments to explore and explain their experience. This more personal and engaged approach to learning addresses a neglected area of higher education: attending to Master's students' academic skill development.

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Introduction

Personal approaches to learning in Higher Education are acknowledged to offer an engaging and motivating approach to learning (Tangney 2014). This article argues that they can also enable students to learn more effectively. Traditionally, students who struggle with the academic demands of their courses are offered generic study skills sessions, outside their programme and even outside their department (Wingate 2015). These sessions often address general academic skills such as deconstructing essay questions, and note taking. But Hallett (2010, 236) argues that many students are not looking for help with essay writing, but something more complex and more fundamental: 'access to the institutional academic rubric; to the academic culture as espoused and expressed within the university'. Since epistemologies vary widely within one institution, academic literacy specialists working in study skills centres can only offer a very general guide. A more discipline-specific introduction to advanced reading and writing skills, and conceptual understanding, could potentially be offered at departmental level, by subject tutors, or subject tutors working alongside academic literacy specialists. Bamber et al. (2017) have called for more attention to be paid to precisely how complex concepts can be taught and learned at Master's level. Using personal and professional experience as the focus for study offers one significant possibility.

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Academic skills at Master's level

There has been relatively little recent research on teaching and learning on Master's level programmes (Bamber 2015). However, some studies point to a significant problem: while universities assume that Master's students begin their programmes already in possession of the knowledge and understanding of academic skills to do well, there is evidence that this assumption is seriously mistaken. Cisco (2020) found that most of the 42 humanities and social sciences postgraduates he interviewed felt lacking in appropriate academic skills. Coneyworth et al's (2020) survey of 70 science students found most of the international students and half of the home students reported feeling ill prepared for the learning culture they had entered. Research from subject tutors' perspectives tells a similar story: Macleod et al's (2018) survey of almost 400 Heads of Master's programmes across 60 institutions showed that while students needed support it was often not forthcoming. O'Donnell (2009) found that while postgraduate students expect a less didactic approach, universities tend to assume a Master's is taught in the same way as undergraduate degrees, and therefore provide little additional support or guidance. Coneyworth et al. (2020) suggest that this stance may be convenient for universities keen to avoid the financial consequences of accepting the need for additional staffing.

Bamber et al. (2017) argue that one aspect of the problem is the lack of shared understanding among both academics and students, about what constitutes what they call 'Masterness'. Are the same skills required as undergraduate level, only more so, or is there something qualitatively different about Master's level study? In order to answer this question the Learning from International Practice in the Taught Postgraduate Student Experience (LFIP) project developed a list of facets of Master's level study, in consultation with university teaching staff across Scotland. The seven facets were abstraction, autonomy, complexity, depth, professionalism, research and enquiry and unpredictability (QAA, 2013). The authors acknowledged that 'they are slippery concepts, open to question, but slippery concepts can be helpful if they raise student and staff awareness of what are also slippery skills levels and slippery expectations within each context' (Bamber et al. 2017, 238). They then surveyed 1204 students to ask how confident they felt in each area. Abstraction, unpredictability and research and enquiry were the areas with which students said they struggled most. This finding is supported by persistent calls for more attention to be paid to critical thinking at Master's level (e.g. Evans et al. 2018; Hathaway 2015; Wingate 2015). In view of the lack of consensus on the meanings of these facets, a more detailed exploration of each is required. Current research on the potential for personal approaches to support each one is also discussed.

Abstraction

Abstract thinking was defined by the LFIP project (QAA 2013, 3) as 'extracting knowledge or meanings from sources and then using these to construct new knowledge or meanings'. The importance of abstraction lies in its power to deconstruct, generalise, uncover and explain patterns in human behaviour. Yet abstraction which ignores the realities of human existence can be a deeply alienating experience. Yancy (in Headley 2014, 126) attacks the tendency in philosophy to ignore lived experience: 'the embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one's search for truth. It is best, we are told, to reason from nowhere'. Davies (2012, 747) argues that sociology shares the same ideals of the subject as 'dispassionate and disembodied'. Stocks and Harvey (2017) suggest that academics may spend too much time teaching about critical distance, at the expense of engagement with ideas. Despite the challenges of feminism, poststructuralism and critical scholars of race, the focus on abstraction as decontextualisation rather than recontextualisation retains a strong and enduring hold in schools and universities.

There is evidence that the power of abstract ideas can be harnessed when students' previously unarticulated knowledge and experience is called upon in the classroom, in other words when they

are given the opportunity to recontextualise an idea. Kahu and Gerrard's (2018, 76) work with undergraduates demonstrated that complex learning about abstract ideas takes places when students are challenged to 'use their experience in conversation with ideas in readings, not expecting the experience to speak for itself'. Stocks and Harvey (2017) describe their use of reflective writing as a way into traditional essay writing with international postgraduate students on a pre-sessional course. They offer an example of a Japanese student who began by writing reflectively about her experience as a young woman in a rock band, and was able to use this to begin to grapple with feminist ideas about the male gaze.

Unpredictability

The LFIP project defined unpredictability as 'recognising that "real world" problems are by their nature "messy" and complex, and being creative with the use of knowledge and experience to solve these problems' (QAA 2013, 6). This definition sees learning at Master's level as supporting and enabling skilful thought and action in professional contexts. This is important, given that most Master's students cite career development as the most important motivator for embarking on a postgraduate degree (Neves and Leman 2019). Valuing unpredictability can help students to step back from the pressures of day to day practice and locate their experience within a wider context, so that they can understand and respond effectively to those pressures, as well as imagine different possibilities.

The LFIP discussion of unpredictability also emphasises the importance of learning that knowledge is provisional. Understanding knowledge as contested, partial and changing helps students to understand the complexity they face in their professional lives. According to Wingate (2015) even postgraduate students often assume that they read merely to reproduce knowledge. She argues that it is essential to move from a transmission model of reading to a transactional one, in which readers interpret texts in relation to their prior knowledge, and use the information to create new meanings of personal use to themselves. There is an important link with abstraction here.

There is to date little research on how addressing the messiness of real life problems works at Master's level (Ameyaw et al. 2019). But a number of studies of undergraduates suggest the benefits of this approach. Kahu and Gerrard (2018) found that by using their own experience alongside their reading of theory and empirical research, students were able to rework their existing interpretations and positions. Harris, Haywood, and Mac an Ghaill 2017a) showed how engaging with the realities of students' lives through coursework made it possible to understand those lives as part of patterns of social change rather than individualised experiences.

Research and enquiry

The category of research and enquiry was the lowest ranked of the seven facets, and the authors of the LFIP project suggest it is the most important marker of success or failure. They acknowledge that whether Master's level research requires different skills, or simply more skill, is an open question. The discussion paper states that research and enquiry at Master's level involves more critical analysis and a deeper engagement with abstraction, as well as a clearer sense of ownership of and control over the projects undertaken, in 'moving beyond the literature towards independent thought' (QAA 2013, 5).

Several studies have identified that many postgraduate students struggle with the notion of independent thought (Cisco 2020). McCulloch (2013, 146) found the international postgraduates in her study struggled to 'take an authoritative stance', and to offer a meaningful evaluation of their sources. Wingate (2015) suggests students often lack confidence because they feel too unfamiliar with the subject content. Stocks and Harvey (2017) highlight a common confusion between academic argument and personal opinion. Bamber et al. (2017) suggest that this problem may be

related to the fact that while independence is prized in theory by universities, in practice didactic teaching, which does not foster independence, is surprisingly common.

Students also find the requirement for critical analysis very difficult. Evans et al. (2018) interviewed 44 postgraduate international students and found that for them, engaging with criticality in written assignment work was the most significant problem they faced. Wingate (2015) argues that these struggles are also experienced by native speakers, and that supporting students to understand what is meant by critical thinking is essential to success at Master's level. Evans et al. (2018) suggest that critical thinking can be developed through group work, in which students share ideas before committing to writing. Stocks and Harvey (2017) and Tran (2010) show how drawing on personal or professional experience can be a way for students to select a meaningful focus, with which they feel confident enough to take a stance, and which offers a way in to evaluating sources.

One further feature of research and enquiry at Master's level, for programmes with a strong vocational element such as education and social work, is a clear link between theory and practice. Tran (2010) found that it was common for students to discuss aspects of their experience in class, in order to explore theory, but students expressed doubt that this would be permitted in their formal assignments. Importantly, among tutors the degree of acceptance of the use of personal experience varied significantly, so students received mixed messages about what was appropriate. Tran argues that this lack of shared understanding, not only between tutors and students, but between tutors, is a major problem.

The changing university landscape

This study is impacted by three important shifts in Higher Education, two long standing and one more recent. There have been repeated calls for universities to adapt to the changing demographic they are working with (O'Donnell et al. 2009; Tran 2010). Wingate (2015, 54) has complained that, though students are forced to adapt to university expectations, 'universities make little effort in adapting educational practices in order to accommodate the needs of students with different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds'.

Marketisation in higher education has had a more marked impact on university culture. Yet Macleod, Barnes, and Huttly 2018) argue that it has not so far led to a shift in focus from research to teaching, despite outward appearances. Indeed, the shift to students as paying customers creates a tension between learning as co-construction of knowledge and learning as receiving a service. Richards and Pilcher (2020) suggest that marketisation is leading many universities to see study skills support as a quicker and cheaper solution to the problem of educational expansion than a wholesale reassessment of pedagogic practices. Wingate (2015) agrees that what is required is a change in the mindset of lecturers, but is pessimistic about the prospects for this.

More recently, the decolonising agenda, and the Black Lives Matter movement, have challenged the institutional norms and pedagogic practices of universities. Research has exposed the continuing existence of an attainment award gap (e.g. Smith 2016), and there is mounting evidence of a hostile environment for Black and minority ethnic students at university (Akel 2019). Low expectations, and an alienating curriculum are repeated findings (Sanders and Rose-Adams 2014). There is also evidence that when issues of race and racism arise in the curriculum, they are too often addressed, by fellow students and tutors, in a superficial, marginalising or abstract manner, which contributes to a sense that minoritised students' perspectives are not valued in the university (Edwards 2014). Alongside this there is an ever increasing evidence base for how to address these issues (Tate and Bagguley 2019). In terms of pedagogy, a more democratic and socially engaged approach is recommended. Drawing students' experiences into the classroom as legitimate objects of study is an example of this approach.

Methods

This is a practitioner research study of a small Master's programme in an urban English university, conducted by the programme lead. As a practitioner research study, the main aim of the project was professional change, and I do not make any claims to generalisability (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). However, I suggest that academics and students in other institutions and in related disciplines are likely to find resonances with their own experience and possibilities for their own practice.

The findings reported in this paper draw on a larger study of thirteen students and four academics. The study explored the question: what are the benefits and risks associated with writing about personal and professional experience for a Master's qualification? This paper focuses on the students' perspectives on how this approach supported their learning in the most complex aspects of 'Mastersness'.

The Master's programme focuses on how identity and culture impact on teaching and learning across a range of educational contexts. The programme attracts mainly mid-career local primary and secondary school teachers from diverse backgrounds, alongside a smaller number of younger international students. In my first year as programme leader I adapted the introductory module in two ways. First, I highlighted the importance of drawing theoretical understanding and personal and professional experience together in seminar discussions. Second, I embedded academic literacies teaching into each taught session. Module evaluations show that these adaptations were well received.

My next step was to adapt the assessment on the module to better reflect the focus on drawing theory and experience together, which was such an important feature of the taught content. The first assignment therefore required students to reflect on how learning about a particular theoretical concept had enabled them to better understand an aspect of their professional or personal experience. In the second assignment students were offered a choice between an autobiographical focus and a more traditional academic essay. In the cohort which took part in the data for this study, 17 of the 28 students opted for the autobiographical essay.

The data explored in this section focuses on interviews with about half of the cohort. The final session of the module included a group discussion, and I used this opportunity to ask the students to indicate if they would be willing to be interviewed in more depth about their response to the teaching and assessment of the module. Thirteen students did so. The students were fairly representative of the full cohort, coming from a range of backgrounds, and attending the programme through a range of pathways, as set out in the table below. Descriptions of nationality and ethnicity are drawn from university records unless the student stipulated their own ethnicity at interview (Table 1).

The students were interviewed face to face for between 40 and 90 minutes, individually or in pairs, as they preferred. Kira and Temi, and Nina and Erin chose to be interviewed together. Interviews took place in a small classroom on campus. They were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Transcriptions were sent to the students for checking.

The data were initially analysed inductively. Each unit of data was given a code, and then organised into themes, including validation, motivation, empowerment, awareness. It was when working on the theme of 'learning' that I recognised the facets identified in Bamber et al's (2017) study, and used these to organise this section of the data.

There are a number of issues to consider when a tutor collects data from their own students. Interviews took place around a month after assignment marks had been returned to students, so the teaching relationship had ended. Nevertheless, I remained the programme leader, so it is certainly possible that some students did not feel able to speak freely. In addition, it is likely that those students who were less positive about personal approaches to learning did not come forward, so that the sample is not representative. Against this I would argue that the anonymous module evaluations from the whole cohort also reflected strong support for the use of experience on the module. Second, the data discussed here focus on the students' reflections on their own thinking,

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Home/EU or international student	Full or part time study	Professional status	Ethnicity/ nationality
Daniela	Home	Part time	teacher	Black British
Elisabeth	Home	Part time	teacher	Black British
Lewis	Home	Part time	teacher	Black British
Kira	Home	Part time	teacher	White British
Temi	Home	Part time	teacher	British-Nigerian
Erin	International	Full time	Social worker	European American
Liv	International	Full time	teacher	European American
Nina	Home	Full time	Not in employment	British Dual heritage- Black British and White
Remy	International	Full time	teacher	Canadian Dual heritage- Black African and White
Hiba	Home	Full time	Not in employment	British Somali
Ana	Home	Part time	teacher	Slovak
Lijuan	International	Full time	Not in employment	Chinese
Hui Yin	International	Full time	Not in employment	Chinese

rather than their judgment of the module. I quote the students at some length in order to show the depth of engagement and the naturalness and openness with which they spoke.

The project followed guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018) and was granted ethical approval from the researchers' institution

Data and discussion

Abstraction

I asked each of the students about any benefits and problems they experienced in writing about their personal or professional experience. In responding to the question about potential benefits, several students reflected on the difference between this approach and their experiences of academic study on their undergraduate degrees.

> Erin: It was good to apply personal experience to theory because in my undergraduate we didn't do it at all and it just led to me not liking my course basically, because I'd kind of ask, well what is the application of this to literally anything in real life and they'd be like, 'that's not important', and I'd be like, 'we-ell, but it is!'

> Remy: We all are guided by something when we're writing, right? . . . So what's the point in hiding it? I know, for me, writing in that serious academic style is what kind of always used to turn me off about writing essays, is that you had to be fake.

> Nina: I did a course that had theory in the title and it felt quite kind of abstract, like you couldn't kind of grasp it . . . sometimes you get these questions and it feels really, not impersonal, but you just answer it and it's quite, like, robotic.

Several other students spoke of their previous learning about theory in a similar way, using the terms 'distant', 'foreign', 'old school', and 'dense'. The alienation that arises from decontextualised learning spoken of by Yancy ((in Headley 2014) and Davies (2012) is evident here. Erin, Remy, Nina and many of the other students had looked for answers to personally relevant questions, and had not found them in the theory they encountered as undergraduates. Erin is scornful of her tutor's response to her question about relevance. Remy is impatient with the requirements of traditional academic writing which requires that students remain at an abstract level, and is more comfortable with a reflective style of writing which uses theory to address the realities she wants to explore. Nina articulates the feeling of detachment when theoretical work lacks application to lived experience.

It must be acknowledged that, Erin's tutor apart, few lecturers would completely fail to make links between abstract ideas and the lived realities they are intended to illuminate. But these students'

comments suggest that perhaps those links may not have been close enough their own experience to be useful. There is evidence, for example, that when issues of race and racism are addressed in university classrooms, they are either dealt with in a very abstract manner, or in a manner which reinforces negative stereotypes or deficit thinking. Both of these approaches increase rather than reduce the sense of alienation and marginalisation some Black and minority ethnic students feel in higher education.

When she spoke of her experience of choosing the autobiographical essay question, which focused on how race had impacted on her education, Nina felt that the links between her reading and her experience were clear:

> I answered, maybe not a question, but things in my childhood, my education. It was something that had just been sat there for about twenty-five years. I feel as though, writing this formal essay, it is just like answering something that's there that I couldn't put into words until I spent this kind of time writing this really difficult essay [laughs]. Yeah it was, for me, just pinpointing something that is something bigger, like something inconsequential that in a bigger framework is quite important.

Nina found the experience of writing her first essay on the Master's programme personally cathartic, as it enabled her to explore her identity as a person with dual heritage, something she had not done before. But she also points to the wider significance of this work when she speaks of 'something inconsequential that in a bigger framework is quite important': the fact that her experience is part of a wider pattern of experiences of people who have one Black and one White parent, and what that means in terms of their identity formation in a society that misunderstands those with dual heritage. The essay enabled her to move from the particular- her own unique experience – to the general, seeing the connections between this and the literature on mixed race identities. It is abstract thinking which does not ignore Yancy's 'embodied self'. It enables that self to see and make sense of what was previously hidden.

Some students reflected that drawing on their own experience enabled them to access abstract ideas:

> Liv: I didn't really understand the Foucault neoliberalism prison thing. The moment we started talking about schools, like how doors have windows, then the picture was shown about the prison, and the mirrors, I was like, 'yeah, for sure. All self-monitoring'. So that was just one that, and then you see it in every school: 'yeah, your door is open'.

Liv remembers a seminar in which Foucault's work was discussed, including the concept of a Panopticon. This was introduced before any discussion of teacher's professional lives, and students were then invited to make connections. Along with many others, Liv was able to draw on her experience as a teacher to see how this abstract idea can explain an aspect of her own experience and to generalise that it is a common feature of contemporary school life.

Two of the students in the group were Chinese students, who struggled at first with the linguistic and disciplinary demands of the course. Reflecting on her essay linking her reading about gender with her experiences as a girl growing up in China, Lijuan said,

> It was nice to answer the question with something I was really interested in, and engaged in. I think it's very useful for a writer to connect their experience and theory. Maybe it's more practical for … it's a challenge for international students, but it's good for other students.

It must be noted that neither Lijuan nor Hui Lin shared the enthusiasm of most of their classmates for the emphasis on personal experience. Lijuan's comment that it may be more practical for home students suggests that as a younger student who had never taught, she felt she did not have sufficient experience in education to draw on. There is evidence that this is a common perception among younger students (Wingate 2015). In addition, as an international student who had worked through a general pre-sessional course on traditional essay writing, it was challenging for her to adapt to yet another new genre. Yet her assignment was a very successful critique of gender norms in her community, which drew effectively on her personal experience as a student.

Unpredictability

Two features of unpredictability were raised by the students at interview. The first relates to the LFIP authors' reference to the importance of understanding knowledge as provisional, and of the responsibility of professionals to engage with the process of building knowledge. Several students spoke of how they made connections between their reading and their thinking.

> Lewis: It's showing you have an awareness of what you're talking about, where you are, what it is, and how I'm going to connect this with me. Because I'm not quite sure why are we doing this if there is no connection.

> Elisabeth: When I look at books I think this is going to help me somehow, or why would I read it? . . . bell hooks, Heidi Mirza, she talks about her life, writers that use Critical Race Theory, it jumped out at me. . . . I get it, learning and empathising, it's fantastic. For me it was a very, very easy way to get into the topic, to discuss the issues.

Both Lewis and Elisabeth were pleasantly surprised by the programme's focus on reading as transaction, in which readers interpret texts in relation to their prior knowledge (Wingate 2015). And both were ready to take up the invitation. As Black teachers, they both came to the programme with personal experience of racism and other social injustices, and they were looking for validation of that experience and intellectual support as they explored the potential for change.

The second feature of unpredictability identified in the LFIP study is the recognition that problems in the real world are complex, and there is a need for both creativity and experience to address them (Bamber et al. 2017). Since most of the students were mid-career teachers, this aspect of unpredictability was central to their engagement with the programme. Many students were like Lewis and Elisabeth in coming onto the programme to find answers to questions that they were already grappling with:

> Liv: It definitely helps to understand the theories better, because it makes them real, versus like an idea. [ ] And I think, too, practice, it makes it changeable . . . what am I doing in my daily practice that will . . . and so the practice of each of those theories, is like, we can do something, each of us can do something to, like, do our part.

> Erin: It makes you more of an anthropologist in your daily life, which is what I wanted to gain in the first place. I wanted to be more aware and I wanted to be more able to be aware, so I think that's been good

Liv here voices the perception, widespread among the group, and discussed above, that theory unconnected to the messiness of real world problems is of limited use. Liv states that the interconnectedness of theory and practice on the programme enabled her to understand theory better, and this in turn enabled her to feel more confident in making decisions about her own practice as a teacher. Erin's goal from the outset was to gain a greater awareness of issues relating to identities and social equity, and how they relate to her professional experience. In contrast, Kira was surprised by the challenges to her thinking she encountered. She reflected how her learning on the programme had heightened her awareness of her own positioning as a White teacher, and how this affected her understanding of racism:

> Kira: It's like I've been given something very precious and I don't know what to do with it. I'm not quite sure of my identity as a teacher, because every time I tell a kid off now, I'm thinking, 'am I being racist?' It's good, because it makes you much more aware of what you're doing and how you're behaving.

The uncertainty she articulates when she says, 'I don't know what to do with it' highlights the potential power of learning which relates directly to practice and the sometimes significant personal transformations that are possible as a result. It also points to the messiness and complexity spoken of in the LFIP definition of unpredictability. There are no easy answers in understanding how White teachers are implicated in racism in schools.

Research and enquiry

The LFIP project identifies three features of research and enquiry: the capacity to take a stance, depth of critical thinking and, of particular importance for vocational MAs such as those in Education and Social Work, clear links between theory and practice. Because they were encouraged to draw on their existing experience in education, most students on the MA appeared to struggle less with the requirement for independent thinking than many respondents to the LFIP survey. Several students spoke of how their current opinions worked as starting points in their search for appropriate reading for their assignments.

> Daniela: I was looking for people that matched my thought, and that made the reading a lot easier. Looking for people that agreed with me, looking for people that disagreed with me. It wasn't foreign. And that was brilliant, seeing my thoughts and my opinions and my criticisms reflected in certain texts, made reading a lot easier, I felt.

> Lewis: I think it was more inviting. For someone who hadn't been in education for so long, there was a starting point. And I also think it focused the reading, because I know I want to talk about that. I remember speaking to you once about this. Really narrow it down, what do you think? That way finding the reading to help build up my personal reflection instead of just floating around in the wind and trying to grab stuff, yeah.

Daniela wrote an assignment about her experiences of racism as a student and a teacher. She makes it clear she understands that using one's own existing views as a starting point for research does not mean only looking for reading which supports your existing point of view, but also reading which challenges it. And it is her personal/professional interest and knowledge of the topic which makes this process more engaging and less intimidating than is often the case (McCulloch 2013). Lewis agreed that already having a provisional opinion on a topic makes the process of narrowing down the search for literature easier. Without this initial stance, students are often left 'floating' and aimless. Tran's work (2010) also shows how drawing on personal or professional experience can help students to select a focus, with which they feel confident enough to take a stance, and which enables them a way to begin to evaluate sources.

Many students found seminar discussions were important in helping them to formulate an appropriate argument for an assignment:

> Temi: That was what was great, that interweaving. Someone would say something and someone else would say, 'oh yeah I read this and this' and it was there in the reading and we'd build on it. Obviously the reading lends itself to the assessment so as you're talking you can annotate your work as different ideas come in.

As in Evans et al's study (2018), many students enjoyed being able to try out their ideas, and make links with their practice in a supportive environment before committing them to writing. For Temi, hearing the different perspectives of her classmates, who were from a range of professional backgrounds, ages and ethnicities, was an important way to develop a critical approach.

Many students drew explicitly on their personal experience to inform the position they took in relation to their chosen topic:

> Daniela: I'm very much more aware of . . . who I am when I'm writing, and how powerful my voice is that who I am really does influence my writing. As a black female teacher, my voice is very different than if I was a non-black female history teacher. So I'm very aware now of my voice when I'm writing.

> Hiba: It helped me know what lens I'm going to take on writing my essay

Daniela reflected that the programme had enabled her to feel more confident and self-aware of how race and gender informed her identity as a teacher and how this in turn influenced her academic writing. Her project was an essentially critical one, in exploring how racism had impacted on her own experience of learning, and how teachers today can avoid these life blighting mistakes.

Hiba described her use of personal and professional experience as the lens she plans to take on writing. She chose to write about social class and education, and used her experience as a British

Somali to critique some of the literature which assumed all working class families are White, as well as the assumptions evident among some policymakers that working class families lack aspiration. Both students used their life experience to bring a critical approach to key debates in their discipline, in which the significance of racism has often been minimised, and the experience of families from working class and minoritised backgrounds misunderstood.

It is essential on a vocational course such as Education, that the links between theory and practice are prominent through all the teaching. While this was written into the planning of the module, it was the students who made this a defining feature of the teaching and learning process, in responding so energetically and knowledgeably to the ideas presented:

> Liv: I thought it was going to be 'define the theory', more like undergrad, but this was more like, 'but is that what actually happens?', which is when your personal experience comes in.
>
> Lewis: I work in a very multicultural area, and now doing gender, it's really making me think about so many things that we do. So personalising the writing made it real as opposed to just academic stuff and just repeating academic speak for the sake of repeating academic speak.
>
> Temi: We know about it, but we're not taught about it. We're not taught how the structures work and how it affects people. For example, when we talked about performativity, it sent me spinning. Someone's written about the way I feel, like, wow!

Liv was one of many students who came to the programme with assumptions about how purely theoretical the teaching might be. She appreciated the attention to bringing theory and practice together, by asking, in seminars, 'is that what actually happens?' and taking time to hear students articulate how theories and concepts worked in practice. They then also explored whether these concepts enabled them to articulate or think differently about issues they were already wrestling with, as well as issues that come to the surface as a result of their engagement with the ideas on the programme. It is clear that in her undergraduate years Liv was not able to make those connections herself, and that tutors were not successful in making meaningful connections for her. As a postgraduate with a range of practical experience in education, as well as personal experience, the connections between theory and practice are readily available. This may be more difficult for some undergraduates, though it should be noted that many students on the MA drew on their personal rather than professional experience to guide their thinking about issues of social justice, a process which is as available to undergraduates, as the work of Harris, Haywood, and Mac an Ghaill (2017a) and Kahu and Gerrard (2018) demonstrates.

Lewis was drawn to the programme for its focus on race and ethnicity, and at the time of the interview was taking a module on gender. He reflects that it is having a direct impact on his thinking as a teacher in a primary school. He is impatient with the idea that an MA might be 'repeating academic speak for the sake of repeating academic speak'. Temi's comment 'we know about it but we're not taught about it' suggests that learning for her has been partly a matter of gaining the tools to articulate and have a wider understanding of what she experiences daily as a teacher. Like many in the group she responded very emotionally to the seminar on teacher performativity, which drew on research to highlight and explain the pressures and the internal conflicts teachers live with in a marketised education system. Having worked in schools for many years they were accustomed to the idea that good teaching is only judged via measureable targets. Being introduced to the history of educational policy making, and critiques of this approach, offered a powerful example of knowledge as contested and changing.

The focus on drawing the personal and professional experiences of this cohort of students into the learning process meant that understanding teacher identities was a recurring theme on the module. The other major theme was racism. These issues were returned to repeatedly over the course of the module, often approached intersectionally as the focus turned to gender, or to social class. They were prominent again in written assignments, and it was in this way that the students themselves shaped their learning and used the module to address their most pressing personal and

professional concerns. As a White lecturer, their insistence on addressing race in particular, in each seminar, enabled me to understand more deeply the salience of this issue in all aspects of Black and minority ethnic students' lives, and the myriad ways in which it does its damage. Not least of these is the traditional relegation of the issue to one seminar per module.

Conclusion

The pedagogical approach outlined in this article is one deceptively simple response to calls to democratise and decolonise the university, because it affords students a much greater say in what is to be learned. While reading may be set by the tutor, responses to that reading can be allowed to determine the direction of seminar discussions. Tran's (2010) work suggests that this is not uncommon practice in universities. It requires a flexible tutor, who is able to respond informatively to the range of directions discussion may take. It also requires a move away from the didactic approach which O'Donnell et al. (2009) argues is still so common. But the students in Tran's study felt they were not permitted to take that approach a step further and use their formal assignments to explore their experience in relation to theory. And teaching staff were also divided on whether this was appropriate. This study suggests that this is a missed opportunity.

Most Master's students embark upon their studies in order to improve their career prospects, and bring with them a good deal of personal and professional experience and knowledge. In this article I have shown how drawing that knowledge into their studies supports the most complex aspects of their learning. It supports abstract thinking, when the emphasis is on recontextualising ideas rather than mere decontextualisation. It acknowledges that students often come with a critical approach to the field, which comes from their own experience of injustice. It enables them to use that experience to take ownership of their chosen area of study, an important differentiating feature of Master's level study. It makes the messy and complex problems they come to explore the centre of their learning, and thus harnesses their expertise, but also pushes them to move beyond their own context to see how their experience is part of wider patterns, and thereby to appreciate its deeper significance.

In arguing for the centrality of experience in Master's level writing, it is not suggested that all learning must be linked directly to experience. But Master's programmes are intended to support professional learning, and if that learning does not enable students to reflect on and understand the complex problems they face in their workplaces it is unlikely to be of benefit beyond supplying a qualification. Many of the students in this study wanted far more than that. They had already identified the problems they wanted to understand, and they came to university for the moral and intellectual support that would enable them to develop this understanding, in order to be better teachers. Their focus was not on the intellectual glories of the past, but the problems of the present and the future. Master's teaching needs to match that urgency and that moral purpose.

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