

The diversity of learners and their life-worlds

KEY IDEAS

- Learner differences have traditionally been understood as differences in ‘ability’, a fixed, cognitive characteristic of students. The shift now is to ‘capability’ which focuses on each student’s potential
- It is necessary to understand the biographies of students, both as learners and young people, as a basis for developing their continuing learning
- Communicative interactions need to incorporate learner diversity

In traditional second language learning, students’ learning has been construed as an individual accomplishment and ‘learner differences’ have been considered essentially from a cognitive point of view.

Within a sociocultural perspective, Caroline Gipps highlights that:

“We are social beings who construe the world according to our values and perceptions; thus, our biographies are central to what we see and how we interpret it.”

(Gipps, 1999:370)

Students and their teachers are ‘social beings’ who interpret the world through their own social and cultural perceptions and values. This quality of people can also be described as their intraculturality. The biographies of students are important because the totality of their life experiences in their cultural life-world, their history (ie experiences over time), their geography (their location), their interactions, their opportunities to participate and learn, their motivations, their aspirations and so on, that influence how, what and why they learn. It is in this sense that teachers need to understand their students as diverse, individual, social and cultural beings, who bring this diversity to the learning process – not just cognitive diversity but social, cultural and linguistic diversity.

The Gipps quotation also highlights the importance of seeing students as young *people*. This seems self-evident but it can be argued that curriculum teaching, learning and assessment – foregrounding ‘skills’, ‘tasks’, ‘outcomes’, ‘standards’, etc – have become ‘de-peopled’. The current emphasis on pedagogy in general education represents a move towards addressing the less-than-ecological view of teaching and learning that has prevailed.

With this recognition in mind, teaching needs to focus on:

“ ... what learners – with minds and bodies, home and peer cultures and languages, previous learning experiences, interests and values – bring to their learning environments and how that shapes their interactions with those learning environments. ... all of the questions about meaning, experience, language, culture, positioning, and so on, need to be asked about the interactions between *particular learners and their learning environments* as they evolve over time.”

(Haertel, Moss, Pullin & Gee, 2008:8)

The key questions for teachers are: What meaning is this student making of what we’re doing? How does this connect with prior experiences and who this student is? How does it contribute to the student’s learning trajectory? How does it contribute to developing the student’s identity?

Cope and Kalantzis also highlight the importance of recognising student diversity, their subjectivities and identities:

“ To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectiveness, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning.”

(Cope & Kalantzis, 2000:18)

This thinking invites teachers to expand the traditional notion of ‘learner differences’ to a recognition of learners and their diverse life-worlds and the need to build on this diversity.

The implications of the expanded view of learner diversity is that teachers need to develop a rich picture of each individual student and incorporate this, in an ongoing way, in the teaching process. They also need to use the diversity of members of the class to inform interactions and discussions that invite students to recognise and work with diversity. Working ethically and responsibly with each student and each group of students means that teachers:

- do all that they can to know the students as young human beings *and* as learners
- are mindful of what they, as teachers, bring to interactions and how they mediate dialogue
- recognise the potential in all students and provide meaningful opportunities for all to learn.

Melissa Gould-Drakeley, a senior teacher in New South Wales, highlights her understanding of each student as *intracultural*.

But what is different for me is the INTRAcultural. And really coming to terms with it, looking at each student's background, and knowledge and experience and absolutely everything they bring to the classroom and how we are all moving together yet on a separate journey ... and that, if I don't understand and they don't understand their intracultural journey, they will never understand the intercultural. And to me that's the difference in the way I teach, I think. It's actually saying to them: what are your assumptions, and what do you think and what do you do ... and I think the students love that because they feel valued; but they also love it because they're actually able to recognise and analyse what they do. Because ... a lot of them don't even recognise what they do and why they do it; why they think that, and where they get that information from. For them it's a real eye-opener and in a sense for me as an educator it's very good too because it made me realise how subjective my teaching can be ... of course it is ... and I can't get away from that, it has to be ...

(Interviewed by Angela Scarino and Leo Papademetre, October 2007)

When teachers work with 'absolutely everything (students) bring', students develop both as language users and as language learners who become aware of how they learn and of the power of language over others. In this way, over time, they develop awareness of themselves as communicators across diverse languages.

Questions for reflection

- 1 How might you develop a rich understanding of your students' biographies?
- 2 In what ways can you use the diversity of students and their families in your class?
- 3 What do you make of Melissa's description? What implications do you draw from it for your own practice?