

# Pedagogy & inequality: a case-study of Team-Based Learning & race

## Introduction

This paper is based on a case study of Team-Based Learning (TBL). TBL is being piloted at the case-study institution and the purpose of this research is to assess whether TBL has an impact on the issues of race identified by critical race pedagogy.

In common with Critical Race Theory (CRT) Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP) has its roots in the experiences of black Americans. Woodson argues from this tradition, holding that the American education system has historically taught black Americans about respecting another culture, but not their own.<sup>1</sup> Woodson was writing in 1933 and both Eugene Butchart<sup>2</sup> and James Anderson<sup>3</sup> have argued, much later, that this was part of a system of post-abolition emancipation and cites this as the main reason that free education for black Americans appeared before other welfare provisions. Whilst this history of black education in the U.S.A. is disturbing, what is more disturbing is the claim that the institutional racism of the education system persisted into the 1990's, and arguably persists today:

Several studies published during the Reagan-Bush years (1980-92) indicate that African American students in K-12 public schools are disproportionately represented in grade retentions, school suspensions, and dropout rates. Similar findings have been reported for Latino children. These studies conclude that prior to leaving school during the adolescent years, these students are frequently poor academic achievers in the elementary grades and experience 'academic suspensions for related disciplinary problems.'<sup>4</sup>

Black and minority ethnic (BME) students in British HE institutions in 2015 experience the same disproportionate representation in statistics charting engagement,<sup>5</sup> retention and achievement,<sup>6</sup> as was reported in the U.S.A. in the 1990s.

In 2012 research published by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) showed that 69.5% of white, UK domiciled, graduates achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, compared to 51.1% of BME, UK domiciled, graduates and 40.3% of black, UK domiciled, students,<sup>7</sup> that's an attainment gap of 18.4% and 29.2% respectively. By 2014 the gap between white and BME students had reduced to 16.1% and with

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. Woodson, *The miseducation of the Negro* (1993, Africa World Press)

<sup>2</sup> Roger Eugene Butchart, *Educating for Freedom: Northern Whites and the Origins of Black Education in the South 1862-1875* (1976, Ph.D thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, Department of History)

<sup>3</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988, The University of North Carolina Press)

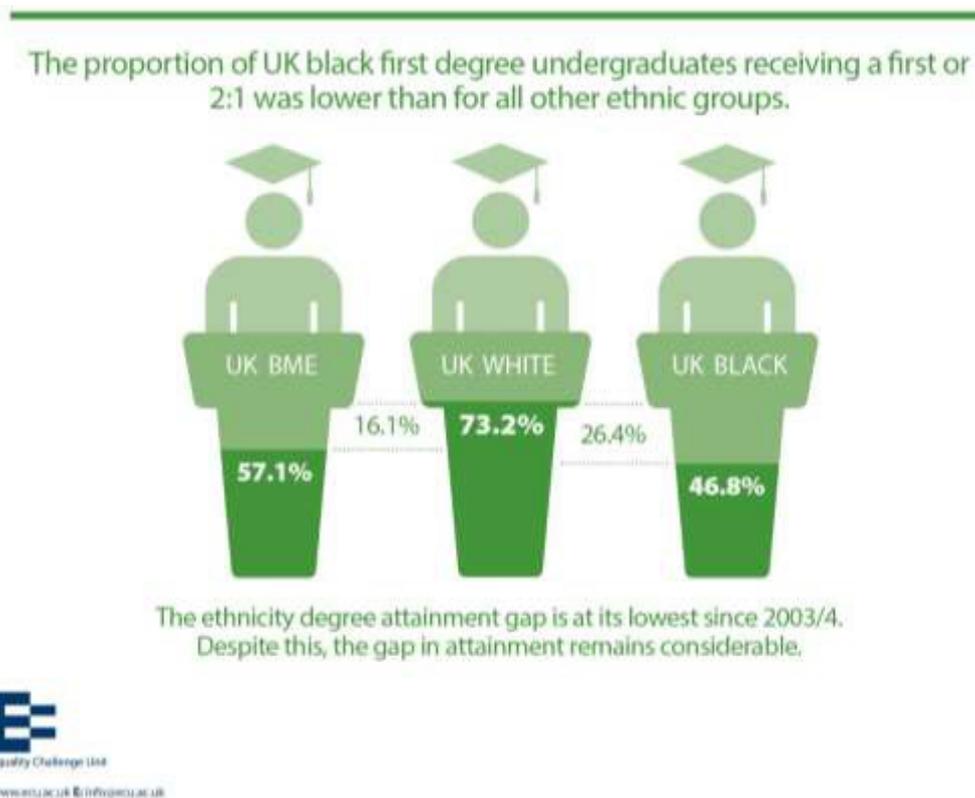
<sup>4</sup> Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe and Karen Glinert Carlson, 'Young African American and Latino children in High-Poverty Urban Schools: How They Perceive School Climate' (1996) 65(1) *The Journal of Negro Education* 60-70, 60

<sup>5</sup> If we accept that attendance is a marker of engagement. For defence of this claim see: Nicola Hughes, 'Attendance as a measure of student motivation and engagement' (2009) 3 *Inform - A journal for international foundation programme professionals* 7-8

<sup>6</sup> For example see: David Gilborn, *Conspiracy? Racism in Education: Understanding Race Inequality in Education* (2008, Routledge)

<sup>7</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2012* (2012, Equality Challenge Unit)

black students to 23.4%,<sup>8</sup> this is the lowest attainment gap since 2003/4 and if the trend continues the gap between white and BME students will have closed by 2028 and with black students by 2022. This is of course an optimistic assessment which ignores the realities of statistical analysis, however even on this assessment it is clear that this is not acceptable progress.



All public bodies, including universities are under a legal duty to collect and publish equality data, the most recent 'Student Statistics Booklet' available on the staff intranet at the case-study institution presents this data for the academic year 2010/11 and although equality data is published for enrolment it is not published for achievement. At the case-study institution in 2012/13 68.9% of white and 51.5% of BME students achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, equating to an attainment gap of 17.4%, and in the 2013/14 academic year 70.8% of white and 54.8% of BME students achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree, equating to an attainment gap of 16%, no separate data was available for Black students. For the purposes of this paper it is therefore accepted, on the data available, that the case-study institution is performing consistently with the sector averages reported by ECU.

We, the academy, can respond to this charge of institutional racism in many ways, and our strategy depends in part on where we identify the problem as lying, otherwise we merely address the symptoms and not the cause. The problem may be super-structural, societal, institutional, curricular, or class-room based, or a combination of these. This case-study aims to test whether a change in the teaching method with three seminar groups can address the concerns that BME students are underachieving.

<sup>8</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Reports 2014: part 2 students* (2014, Equality Challenge Unit)

## Case-study

CRP focuses on *what* we teach, not *how* we teach. The *what* is dealt in the academic discussions relating to curriculum, which are outside the remit of this paper, in this discussion on pedagogy I will focus on the *how*. Larry K. Michaelson claims that Team-based learning (TBL) as a pedagogy is inclusive and closes the attainment gap.<sup>9</sup>

I have been trialling TBL in an Introduction to Public Law module at the case-study institution. The module is taught at level 4 to first-year students on the bachelors of law degree (LLB) and the joint honours degree. I have collected data from my own observations and from a post-doctoral researcher who has observed my teaching, analysed statistical data on achievement and analysed the transcripts of semi-structured interviews which were carried out by a post-doctoral research assistant.

For TBL students divided in teams based on their answers to a short quiz aimed at assessing their political beliefs, there were 9 teams or political parties of 6-8 students as 3 seminars were divided into 3 groups. 2 other seminars ran for the same module and were taught in a more traditional, didactic style. There were 72 students who were supposed to attend my 3 TBL seminars and 36 who were supposed to attend the 2 non-TBL seminars, although actual attendance was way below this. The TBL students on the 25 point score used at the case-study institution scored 1.06 marks lower than the non-TBL students, however the same students scored 0.43 marks lower in another first-year module so overall TBL has had a slight detrimental effect (-0.63) however given that the numbers were so small and it impossible to mitigate for other variables I think this is statistically negligible so my tentative conclusion from the quantitative data would be that TBL has no discernible effect on attainment. The reasons for this unremarkable conclusion are illuminated by the qualitative data.

My observations and those of the observer report similar patterns of behaviour across all 9 groups, the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews also reveal patterns of attitudes and behaviours on grounds of race and gender. To illustrate the findings I have therefore chosen to focus on two students from the same team. The methodology is focused and narrative in approach but appropriate for this study, it is the approach described by Professor Michael Apple in his lecture to the Centre for Research into Race and Education.<sup>10</sup> Apple charges the critical scholar with the task of “describing reality critically” by “acting as secretaries” to those groups who are experiencing the existing relationships of unequal power. It is my intention to give two “thick descriptions”, as Apple calls them, of the lived experiences of two of my students, I hope to achieve what Apple talks about, namely: “research that says ‘here is life’.”

The first student I wish to discuss is Hersha (not her real name), she is a British Asian student who came to University straight from concluding her ‘A’ levels and is 19 years old. The second student I will discuss is Cezar (not his real name), he is a white Romanian student, this is his second degree and he is in his mid-twenties.

I will begin by sharing the stories of what happened in classes, these are drawn from the observations taken by the post-doctoral researcher and myself.

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Michaelson, ‘Masterclass in Team-Based Learning’ (presentation at the University of Northampton, 10 November 2014)

<sup>10</sup> Michael Apple, ‘Educational Realities and the Tasks of the Critical Scholar/Activist in Education’ (presented as the annual lecture at the Centre for Research into Race and Education, University of Birmingham, 10 June 2015)

Hersha and Cezar work in the same team; they are two team members with the best attendance. Their team was first observed during a team readiness assurance test (t-rat) on 23 October 2014. T-rats are the second stage in TBL, students first complete a multiple choice individual readiness assurance test or i-rat based on the material covered in the lecture and reading, students are given 10 minutes to complete this. In the t-rat the team was given 20 minutes to complete the same multiple-choice test. 5 members of Hersha and Cezar's team, including them, were present. As well as the Cezar there was another non-British white male of and one Asian British male, there was also another female Asian student. In discussions it was the male members of the group that were dominant, the most dominant being Cezar. When Cezar discussed the answers he directed his discussions at the other white male students. Hersha joined in rarely but the other female student didn't contribute at all. The team finished their t-rat early and decided to try to choose a leader for their political party, all 3 male students nominated themselves, the female students didn't.

The team was again observed on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014. This time multiple choice scratch cards were provided for the t-rat exercise. Hersha and Cezar were joined in their team by the two male students, the other female student was absent. The Asian male took control of the scratch card and again it was the males who dominated, although Hersha did offer her answers. There was limited discussion or negotiation of the answers, instead the team adopted the practice of voting on answers. On two occasions the Asian male asked the others what they thought and a discussion developed between the Cezar and the other white male, to the exclusion of Hersha and the Asian male. When Hersha did speak she was interrupted by Cezar and he contradicted her, instead offering what he thought was the right answer.

The rats are meant to identify readiness to proceed by identifying any areas of common misunderstanding, once errors in understanding have been remedied the class moves to an application exercise, applying their knowledge to a task. An application exercise took place on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014, the original 5 team members were all present and the team was asked to complete two tasks. In the first task Cezar led the discussion, he did most of the talking although he occasionally asked questions. Cezar and the other males conferred in a huddled group whilst Hersha and the other female were passive and outside of the huddle. The other female appeared completely disengaged. During the discussion Cesar proposed ideas, and the other white male nods along but is less engaged. The Asian male student takes notes and nods. Hersha tries to offer responses on every occasion Cezar interrupts her. The Asian male is confident to speak-up occasionally and speaks directly to Cezar, Hersha also speaks directly to Cezar, rather than the group. The other female student sat quietly rocking, showing no sign of engagement and no note-taking. For the second task the team is asked to join in an instantaneous response exercise, this means they must select a numbered response to a question using numbered cards and a menu holder. On the first question Hersha immediately suggests that the answer is either 1 or 5 and Cezar immediately suggests answer 1 and in defending it stifles any discussion – the correct answer is in fact 3. In all instances once Cezar has spoken rest of group are quiet, the Asian male makes a show of re-reading the question. When Cezar becomes uncomfortable with the silence he throws out a question but then quickly takes control again, proposing answer 1 again and concluding discussion, Hersha places the number card on menu holder. For the remainder of the time (2 of the 5 minutes given to the task) Cezar bolsters his position, the other white male supports and validates him whilst Hersha and the other female have a separate conversation unrelated to the topic.

On 16 January 2015 the students were again observed completing a t-rat, in this session attendance was low and the three teams had to be combined. Present were Hersha and Cezar as well as a white British male, a black British male who had not attended any previous sessions, and two white

females. One of the white females and Cezar start the process in terms of reading out the questions and the white female takes charge of the scratch card. The discussion starts with these 2 and the other white male offering their opinion in terms of the answers. Cezar does try to elicit answers from other team members and takes control of the scratch card. On every question all the white students offer their answers without prompting whilst Hersha and the black male don't offer their answers until asked. The t-rat continues with the white female taking the role of reading out the questions and Cezar and the other white male taking the lead in offering answers. Cezar is always the one to ask other students what they think and he and the other white male dominate in terms of providing the explanations for the answers. The black male says nothing and Hersha only offers her view when she is asked. There is some negotiation in relation to the answers and there is some surprise when it transpires that the more dominant males were not right. On one question the black male did get one of the answers correct when other group members did not, however, he did not offer his answer and so didn't mention this to the group until after they had established the wrong answer and the right answer had been identified by a process of elimination. Feeling more confident when it came to the next question the black male did offer his answer, however he got no response from other group members. As more questions are discussed, the black male does engage a little more and Hersha also offers answers and provides reasons for her answers, but discussions are still dominated by the white male students. Hersha does get an answer right and points this out to the group but she is ignored and the group answer is different from the one she suggested. On later questions there is some attempt to establish the answer democratically with all the students in the group 'voting' for an answer, however the black male says he doesn't know what the answer is. According to Michaelson the discussions draw out knowledge with the teams generally scoring more highly than their best individual however in this t-rat the team didn't do better than some of the individual members of the team. On one difficult question Hersha and the black male student both had the correct answer, however they didn't present their answer with confidence and said they were unsure, Cezar and the other white male took over and talked the group into the wrong answer, then repeated this – the team scored 0 for this as the answer offered by Hersha and the black male student was the last answer scratched off. According to Michaelson it is at these moments that the group dynamic changes and teams value the contributions of previously ignored members.<sup>11</sup> He argues this is why TBL is inclusive, however I noted that this did not change the dynamic of the group, rather when Cezar felt unsure he shared responsibility by taking soundings but when he was sure he railroaded discussion. On the more difficult questions there was lots of discussion but as the team were unsure of the correct answer the discussion did not seem to equate to learning.

After the module was concluded semi-structured interviews were carried out by a post-doctoral researcher, the reason for choosing this approach over interviewing the students myself was that as the lecturer my power would distort the results and lessen the value of the data. The participants were selected using purposive sampling and both Hersha and Cezar were included in the sample.

Having had the interviews transcribed the first thing that strikes me as a reader is the shape of the text in the document, even in this one-to-one environment where experiences rather than academic material is discussed Hersha is still reticent to share her opinions, in her interview there are 144 lines of response to 79 lines spoken by the interviewer, 27 of the responses are one-word answers. This contrasts with Cezar's interview in which only 11 lines spoken by the interviewer elicited 133 lines of response. Hersha's interview contains a lot of description in her early answers and it is apparent that she doesn't feel her perceptions or opinions have much value. When Hersha is asked about the

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<sup>11</sup> Larry Michaelson, 'Masterclass in Team-Based Learning' (presentation at the University of Northampton, 10 November 2014)

TBL exercises she unquestioningly relates dominance to expertise, despite the fact that the observations outlined above demonstrate that the dominant members sometimes got it wrong and the team suffered because the views of the less dominant members were observed, at one point she says of Cezar and the other white male student: "Well there's two candidates in our like team that are quite, they understand a lot",<sup>12</sup> interestingly the Asian male student in the group has achieved amongst the top grades of the current first-year, consistently achieving firsts, this is not true of the two male students. She later conflates confidence in expressing an opinion with knowledge, saying: "And Cezar [name changed], like he's comfortable with public speaking, whereas I, like I don't know enough information, like I don't mind, you know, like doing public speaking and whatever but I don't know enough information",<sup>13</sup> it seems that she blames herself for her subordination accepting the disempowerment imposed on her because of a belief based on a lack of self-confidence in our academic abilities which may, in part, be rooted in the lack of recognition her opinions are given. This lack of self-belief is demonstrated when towards the end of the interview she says: "I just feel like I don't know as much as other people know."<sup>14</sup> The disappointment as the lecturer of this seminar is that Hersha expresses a strong desire to be involved in activities but accepts exclusion because she has accepted the myth that her contribution is less valuable:

So yeah, just like, I kind of just want to participate and get stuck in really with what we're doing' cause it is quite fun so, and I do enjoy like what we're doing and stuff 'cause it's quite cool. I know it's quite like small and 'cause you watch like, 'cause of the general election that's coming up, like that you watch on the news, it's quite exciting for, like you know, Prime Minister's Questions, you just, it's so intriguing and then then to know that we're doing a similar thing but on like an amateur sort of, like you know, a stage, it's just nice, I think anyway.<sup>15</sup>

When asked to explain her role in the group she explains that she takes as less active role, but explains this in the language of personal choice despite it being apparent that her views were dismissed by others, then justifies this through a narrative of self-blame because of a mis-perception about the value of her own opinions: "I feel like the role I take is because I take a slightly back role, like' cause there's other people that are, like as I said before, like more vocal and they have a lot more insight into like, you know, Public Law. So I feel like I take more of a back role 'cause I don't know as much so I can't share as much as they can".<sup>16</sup> What is most concerning to me is that Hersha doesn't feel that she can approach me, as her lecturer, and whilst she does say that I'm unapproachable she says "I don't feel like he's approachable to *me*"<sup>17</sup> and then quickly descends into a narrative of self-blame, holding that her lack of subject knowledge makes her unworthy to seek support, asked if she would ask me if she didn't understand Hersha answered: "I think maybe 'cause, I don't know. I don't know, I don't know. I think I would if I was really confused, I would but I think, I think the honest answer to that question is that I don't really know enough"<sup>18</sup> ... "I'd actually go home and just research it myself or ask somebody else."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interview lines 67-68

<sup>13</sup> Interview lines 98-99

<sup>14</sup> Interview lines 115-116

<sup>15</sup> Interview lines 124-131

<sup>16</sup> Interview lines 150-154

<sup>17</sup> Interview line 287

<sup>18</sup> Interview lines 291-293

<sup>19</sup> Interview lines 305-306

From Cezar's interview it is clear that as a teaching methodology TBL is hugely beneficial to him, her notes: "sometimes you can learn more from your peers than you can from your tutor."<sup>20</sup> Cezar claims to benefit from TBL in the ways that Michaelson claims *all* students do.<sup>21</sup> Cezar then hi-jacks the interview, choosing to explain in detail to the interviewer his experiences of a module on creative writing he's studying and whilst this is interesting it is not relevant to the discussion, what is of interest is how comfortable Cezar is in pursuing his own agenda irrespective of the aims of the interviewer. When the interview returns to TBL it is interesting to read how Cezar perceives the group discussion: "usually when the answer is clear most of us have the same answer and we realise it so we just tick the answer most of us have chosen."<sup>22</sup> This perception is however contradicted by the observation data, when Cezar talks of the whole group he is talking of him and the other white male student, where they agree he perceives a democratic consensus of the whole group, apparently unaware that other members of the group haven't contributed. Where Cezar perceives a lack of interaction he blames the student, not the fact that they have been ignored or interrupted: "The members who are, you know, less, are quiet, they usually rely on those who talk and seem to know more, to give the proper answers without trying to figure out the answers for themselves and I think this is certainly not a good thing."

## Conclusions

The observations of Vanessa Hunn<sup>23</sup> of black American students having negative experiences of TBL in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the US are echoed in my research, what is surprising is not that there appears to be a group dynamic influenced by gender and colour but how stark this is and that patterns observed at PWIs with their alleged race issues are replicated in a UK HEI. What this snapshot of my research demonstrates is that the group dynamics do not change when a different pedagogy is adopted. Students still seem to adopt their "working identities"<sup>24</sup> of dominant white and subservient black, in Hersha's case she was expected to fulfil the role of subservient BME female, surrendering to Cezar's white dominance, and did so justifying it to herself with a narrative of differing academic abilities and valuing his opinion over her own. Cezar perceived an egalitarian environment where students were all equally empowered to contribute, but some did not by choosing to be lazy. The reality is that Hersha arrived at university disempowered by her female, BME identity and reinforced this through a narrative of self-blame. Cezar, conversely arrived empowered by his white, male privilege but fails to recognise this, identifying with a neo-liberal narrative of his position of dominance being earned through hard-work and Hersha and other's positions of subservience being deserved because of a lack of effort.

Critical pedagogy appears to explain the findings of this research; whether it be the "working identities"<sup>25</sup> model favoured by CRT or the definite relations described by Karl Marx<sup>26</sup> or the models

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<sup>20</sup> Interview lines 28-29

<sup>21</sup> Larry Michaelson, 'Masterclass in Team-Based Learning' (presentation at the University of Northampton, 10 November 2014)

<sup>22</sup> Interview lines 117-119

<sup>23</sup> Vanessa Hunn, 'African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions' (2014) 45(4) *Journal of Black Studies* 301-314

<sup>24</sup> Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gilati, 'Working Identity' (1999-2000) 85 *Cornell Law Review* 1259

<sup>25</sup> Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gilati, 'Working Identity' (1999-2000) 85 *Cornell Law Review* 1259

<sup>26</sup> "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond

of patriarchy described by radical feminism learners are not empowered by TBL. Whilst both gender and race were identified in the case-study what the observations show is that race is the predominant factor, when white female students join the group because of poor attendance they immediately side with the white males and become dominant, whereas the black male who joins late is side-lined and ignored similarly to Hersha.

These ideas of empowerment and disempowerment being drivers of oppression in the learners' experiences are evident in the work Friere in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the subsequent work of dialogic theorists like Othwaite and Habermas and are expressed well by Apple:

What *counts* as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and – just as critically – who is allowed to ask and answer all these questions are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in society.<sup>27</sup>

This research suggests that Apple's critical pedagogy explains why TBL does not appear to have produced the benefits promised.

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definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), preface

<sup>27</sup> Michael W. Apple, 'The Politics of Official Knowledge: Does a National Curriculum Make Sense?' (1993) 95(2) *Teachers College Record* 222-241, p.222