Promoting students’ ‘resilient thinking’ in diverse higher education learning environments

Literature review

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The concept of resilience in the context of learning in Higher Education

The concept of resilience is associated with a variety of disciplines including childhood and developmental psychology (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995, Luthar, 2003), health and risk factor research (Reich et al., 2010) engineering, and social ecology (Folke, 2006). Almedom et al. (2009) state that the bulk of literature on resilience and related psychological constructs of ‘hardiness’, ‘mastery’ or ‘thriving’ in the face of adversity is historically located in social and developmental psychology, mainly focussing on strategies of mental and social defiance among children and youths living in sub-optimal home and neighbourhood environments.

Whilst there is prolific research on ‘resilience’ in childhood, primary and secondary education (Bryan, 2005), the concept has only recently emerged in studies focussing on students’ learning contexts and experiences in Higher and/or tertiary Education. In a critical appraisal of various approaches to ‘resilience’ in HE, Walker et al. (2006) define it as the “...ability to recover rapidly from difficult situations” and “...capacity to endure ongoing hardship in every conceivable way.” (p. 251). Other authors speak of “...the action or act of rebounding or springing back; the quality or fact of being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock, illness, etc.” (Resilience 2010, quoted in Mercer, 2010: 1) or as “...a basic strength underpinning positive characteristics within a person’s emotional and psychological make up” (Reivich and Shatte, 2002: 59)

The current interest in resilience in the context of adult learning within university settings may relate to the growing economic and emotional challenges and high levels of competitiveness students face in HE settings worldwide. A cursory look into current literatures suggests that this interest is also linked to ubiquitous concerns with equality and diversity policies and practices across increasingly complex and globalised Higher Education environments (Caruana & Ploner, 2010; Leask, 2006).

Accordingly, studies on resilience have been mainly focussing on levels of adjustment, achievement and retention of ‘minority’ and ‘non-traditional’ student cohorts, black and other minority groups (Cantwell et al, 2001; Edwards, 2009; Morales, 2008b; Sennett et al., 2003; Shield, 2004; Stutman et al., 2002), aspects of gender (Morales, 2008b; Wright, 2007), class (Goodwin, 2002), sexual orientation, mental health and disability (Anderson & Burgess, 2011; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010; Murphy, 2007). Yet other authors seek to address resilience in relation to different transition stages and university entry levels such as school leavers (Gall et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2004; Urquhart and
Pooley, 2007), doctoral students (Chapman-Hoult, 2009) and second pathway or mature students (Munro and Pooley, 2009). There is also a number of studies which explore resilience in the context of particular academic disciplines and learning/training trajectories (Kinman and Grant, 2010; Krasny et al., 2009; Wilks and Spivey, 2009).

**New trends and approaches: diversity and identity**

It is striking that within current research into particular student cohorts little attention has been given to issues of adjustment and attainment among international students. Largely focussing on UK, US and Australian contexts, it is yet another justifiable critique that research is almost exclusively concerned with notions of resilience in western and ‘developed’ HE settings.

Drawing on Godwin’s (2002) critique that much research into the student learning experience tends to circumvent complex aspects of identity and diversity and tends to stereotype homogenous student groupings, Walker et al. (2009) suggest a more integrative approach to resilience. They argue that the separation between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students cohorts often fails to recognize “…the subtle combinations of experiences which each bring to learning”. Likewise, the focus on particular cohorts disguises the fact that “…resilience is a dynamic, contextual construct, which is also therefore unstable, and success factors at any point in life may not be mutually facilitative of positive or ‘protective’ resilient behaviours later” (p. 256).

In line with these arguments, more recent approaches have moved away from both universalistic and deterministic conceptions of resilience as ‘inherent’ or ‘pre-existing’ personal traits of an individual or group towards the recognition of locality, communities, and the continuous development and negotiation of identities and autonomous selves (Chan, 2001; Holliday & West, 2010; Luthar, 2003; Mercer, 2010; Walker et al., 2006). Here, attention is drawn towards the qualitative ways in which students narrate and author their biographies and experiences in the course of (and beyond) further and higher education. Such innovative approaches build on students’ lived, embodied, affective and cognitive experiences and reflect on their relations with, and embeddedness in social and family networks. Most importantly, it is recognised that studenthood is not an isolated ‘state’ but always a transitory and ‘liminal’ work in progress in which crises and failures are considered as a possible positive step towards self-realisation (Field & Mogan-Klein, 2010). In terms of teaching and learning ‘interventions’, such integrative approaches argue for more participatory and action-oriented educational practices that acknowledge students’ own capacity building based on informed decisions, investigations focused on ‘authentic’ and lifeworld-based scientific questions (i.e. situational, community-based, service learning styles, etc.). They favour
learning outcomes which do not derive from prescribed, top-down teaching practices but acknowledge complexity and emerge from dynamic interactions of learners with their changing social and physical environment within and outside the classroom (Little & Froggett, 2010; Hammond, 2004; Krasny et al, 2009).

**Resilient thinking in the context of Higher Education learning**

One has to approach current conceptions of ‘resilient thinking’ and ‘resilient learning’ in analogy to the ongoing paradigm shift, which, according to Walker et al. (2006) “…moves towards understanding the trajectories by which people create more fulfilling experiences of learning, weaving in experiences of resilience and recovery along the way” and considers “…the life experiences and personality traits that interact and build resistance to strong social and cultural pressures that influence people to take the decisions they do” (pp. 253-54). Winder (2006) describes resilient thinking as a form of ‘creative problem solving’, the capacity to be at once ‘flexible’ and ‘accurate’, the ability to see and consider different points of view and to continue with daily life despite obstacles. In Fazey’s view, ‘resilient thinking’ is tightly intertwined with what she terms ‘personal epistemological beliefs” (PEBs). Such can be described as the “…beliefs people hold about the nature of knowledge and how a person comes to know something.” (Fazey, 2010: 11).

In the process of students’ knowledge production, ‘resilient’ or ‘higher order thinking’ is about challenging factual and fixed knowledge, dualistic styles of thinking (“right or wrong”, reciting content) as well as overcoming conventional notions of the learner as mere consumer of knowledge. By contrast, resilient thinking “…encourages thinking in ways consistent with more sophisticated views of knowledge and knowing”; it promotes the emerging formation and deconstruction of identities and the development of multiple perspectives (epistemic pluralism) that influence beliefs about the “dimensions of certainty and simplicity” (Fazey 2010, 15); most importantly, resilient thinking implies that knowledge and knowing is always tentative and evolving, and requires thinking in terms of the non-continuities and uncertainties that messy real-world situations always entail. The recognition that ‘resilient thinking’ is situational and emerges over time also echoes recent discussions in social ecology. Folke et al. (2010) argue that besides persistence and adaptability, transformability is a defining component of resilient thinking and relates to the capacity to create new ‘stability domains’ and to cross “…thresholds into a new development trajectory. Deliberate transformation requires resilient thinking…” (Folke et al, 2010, p. 25)

**Resilience, resilient thinking and cross-cultural capability in the internationalised curriculum**

As outlined in a previous paragraph, resilience and resilient thinking has rarely been addressed in relation to increasing student mobility and the ongoing structural or demographic diversity through
internationalisation, across university campuses worldwide. This is surprising since displacement and the transition across different geographical, language, cultural and academic environments suggests high levels of adaptation, problem solving skills, and individual persistence on behalf of the student. This lack of attention is equally surprising if one takes into account the ample potentials for exploring ‘epistemic pluralism’, socio-cultural perspectivisation and meaningful interactions within increasingly diverse campuses and classrooms, all described as key components for the development of resilience and ‘resilient thinking’. A host of studies stress various aspects of ‘adjustment’ and ‘acculturation’ among international students (Gu et al., 2010; Wang, 2009), or explore the potential for developing ‘critical thinking’ or ‘critical literacy’ within and through the multicultural campus/classroom (Egege & Kutieleh, 2005; Caruana, 2009). Here, literature suggests that whilst students value working in the ‘international classroom’ benefits from these cross-cultural encounters tend to be incidental in the absence of the conscious use of difference in the curriculum which is resilience-based and meaning-orientated (Harrison & Peacock, 2009). Drawing on Gould’s (1995) critique that multicultural education tends to teach students to look at rather than into the lives of the other, De Vita and Case (2003) argue for a more open-ended form of pedagogy which ensures that cultural differences and worldviews are heard and explored and hence allows conversations among different voices and the discovery of cultural perspectives that are too often absent in traditional academic narratives. In their judgment, this would help students to “…construct understandings that are progressively more mature and critical. A corollary of this perspective would be the pursuit of didactic strategies aimed at facilitating processes of self-enquiry, critical reflection, mutual dialogue and questioning.” (De Vita & Case, 2003: 393).

Complementary to this position, some authors promote the concepts of ‘cross-cultural capability’ and ‘global graduate attributes’ with the internationalised curriculum providing the means of preparing students for the challenges of an increasingly diverse, ‘super-complex’ and globalised world (Brustein, 2007). Killick (2008; 2009), defines ‘cross-cultural capability’ as a meaningful way of being with others which encompasses the ability to communicate effectively across cultures as well as to locate and recognise the legitimacy of other cultural practices in one’s disciplinary, personal and professional life. Caruana (2011) suggests the importance of acknowledging that cross-cultural capability is not an absolute concept in the sense of either you have it or you don’t. Rather it is emergent, iterative and highly dependent on experience. Development of cross-cultural capability suggests some kind of shift in disposition, understanding how cross-cultural encounters have influenced beliefs, values and attitudes or alternatively, where dispositions remain constant or indeed, have been reinforced, understanding equally the factors related to the encounters which
have given rise to this situation. So for Caruana (2011) the first principle in assessing cross-cultural capability is determining individual starting positions in relation to a topic, idea, concept, problem, experience etc. which will be dependent upon past experience, existing knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes. Killick (2009) in taking up a global ethical stance harnessing criticality, social awareness and individual forms of freedom, proposes that self-identification as a ‘global citizen’ and the ‘attributes’ of cross-cultural capability and global perspectives can form the basis for a values-based internationalised university curriculum across the disciplines “… to enable students to make their way in the world(s) of the future.” (Killick, 2009: n.p.).

**Resilient thinking, critical thinking and multiple perspectives**

The foregoing discussion might suggest that ‘resilient thinking’ as part of the curriculum does not differ from much discussed forms of students’ ‘critical thinking’ or ‘critical literacy’ in alluding to aspects of (creative) problem solving, coping with curricular challenges or perspectivisation. Indeed, both concepts of ‘resilient thinking’ and ‘cross-cultural capability are also commonly based on principles of comparability, analysing intercultural encounters in order to “…recognise the cultural relativity or reality and the non-transparent and contextual nature of cultural knowledge” (Stier, 2009:8). Among the various opportunities and positive interventions for promoting ‘cross-cultural understanding’, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘multiple perspectives’ for both students and teachers, the role of multicultural group work has been examined possibly in more depth than any other (Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Osmond & Roed, 2009; Robinson, 2006). De Vita (2001) cites the positive effects of multicultural group work on individual students and argues that the performance of culturally mixed groups is neither a function of individual ability of the least able group member, nor of the average ability of the members of a group but tends to reflect the ability of the most able group member. In a study on domestic students’ experiences in the international classroom, Harrison and Peacock (2009) find that multicultural group work needs to be guided by proactive management and needs to provide opportunities for students to explore dissonance, discomfort and discussion around difference through a creative approach to teaching a particular topic. Nield and Thom (2006) note, that creative approach would not only confront cultural conventions of ‘western’ curricula and pedagogies at a strategic level but also to involve more emotive and affective ways of teaching and group assessment. In a similar vein, and reflecting on experiential learning interventions within the geography curriculum, Haigh (2009) highlights the usefulness of more inward-looking and empathic ways to engage with multiple, non-western cultures of knowledge in the international classroom. Haigh (2009) maintains that although students often find such engagements ‘troublesome’ and struggle to cross a learning thresholds or to attain a new world view, it helps them to critically reflect on the cultural preconception that only Western
academic traditions are normal, and to recognise alternative knowledge based on different fundamental premises.

Perhaps, the interconnectedness between ‘critical thinking’ and ‘resilient thinking’ in the internationalised curriculum is best addressed through a more ‘profound’ understanding of ‘multiple perspectives’ which not only recognizes different ways of knowledge in a particular (disciplinary) context but engages with the complex and different ways of living, doing, being and becoming (Caruana, 2011). In this sense then, ‘cross-cultural capability’ as well as the related concept of ‘intercultural competence’ (Nilsson, 2003) are by no means absolute and ‘ready-to-assess’ personal qualities, rather they are always ‘in the making’. In order to make sense of ‘resilient thinking’ and, likewise, ‘critical thinking’, one has to account for the ways in which a person’s knowledge, attributes, emotions, and skills change and develop over time and in the process enable individuals to positively interact across and between cultures, both at home and abroad (Caruana, 2011; Nilsson, 2003). To ‘assess’ these complex issues, then, requires fine-tuned, qualitative examination that captures critical moments and sites of personal change and values individual narratives and histories (e.g. oral history, biographical interview styles of research as reflected in this study)

In contrast to ‘critical thinking’ which may be regarded as a ‘generic’ academic learning outcome or ‘graduate attribute’ within particular academic and disciplinary traditions, ‘resilience’ and ‘resilient thinking’ may provide a different and more focussed lens through which to understand students’ values, expectations, capabilities, anxieties and hopes in the course of their studies (and beyond). As recent literatures suggest, such meaningful and more inclusive interventions to learning and teaching need to provide ample space for the ‘student voice’ (Jones & Caruana, 2010) and to learn from students’ (and staffs’) perceptions, biographies, lifeworlds and everyday ways of ‘coping’ in Higher Education settings. According to Leask (2009), one way of achieving this is to emphasise equally the formal and informal dimensions of the curriculum and to create a campus environment that values diversity, motivates interaction between international and home students, and engages a range of people across departments and university institutions. Considering the ethical implications that are linked to more ‘informal’, personalised and holistic styles of learning and teaching, this study draws on a broad range of experiences of resilience ‘on the ground’ in order to identify a selection of focussed interventions for the internationalised curriculum.

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