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Pedagogy-walk the walk, don't talk the talk. An opinion piece

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ABSTRACT

In this opinion piece I reflect on an inspiring 2019 Advance HE STEM conference in Birmingham. In doing so I identify the term pedagogy as one aspect which ran contrary to the noble aspirations of the conference. I outline my own perspective as both an insider and outsider in my role of a Teacher-Practitioner. I use this vantage point to outline the background to the term pedagogy together with its suggested alternatives. I review the roots of the word itself to suggest that instead of overusing the term pedagogy, we should focus more on the *journey* of education we are privileged to share with our students.

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Encouraging inclusion and diversity were key themes at the excellent recent Advance HE STEM Conference in Birmingham and my experience of the meeting was very much in keeping with this. I found there an exciting meeting of specialists with an infectious enthusiasm, encouraging both new ideas and interdisciplinary collaboration. It was fitting that we all mingled together between presentations on the same floor level without distinguishing professors from students. On the day I presented, approximately a third of all the talks had an important component relating to student inclusion, improving diversity or including students in the learning process. This very much ran in line with my own approach of valuing the individual students, and as a result significantly improving student engagement. There were many positives I experienced at this conference on that bright but cold day in Birmingham.

This atmosphere was consistent with the pre-conference preposition aims, and yet there was one word which repeatedly cropped up as an obstacle to these objectives. This is a word that has more to do with being exclusive than inclusive, namely the word Pedagogy, and its adjectives 'pedagogic' and 'pedagogical'. This term was not much used in the titles of presentations, but rather in the content of every single talk I went to. Often the use seemed to be not clearly required, and it really struck me that the term almost *had* to be used to as validation of the presentations in the conference setting.

In naming pedagogy as a target for a piece submitted to Higher Education Pedagogies I realise I am probably not starting with a favourable pitch, but is a topic which I feel is important to keep at the centre of discussion as it is so commonly used, and yet is not without controversy. I write this piece with the vantage point both of an outsider and insider. I say this because I have been involved in higher education teaching for over

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22 years as a medical doctor, and yet it is only in recent years that I have been able to reduce my clinical work and concentrate on teaching as the main component of my job. Therefore for nearly two decades I could perhaps have been described as an ‘enthusiastic amateur’ by full-time educationalists, and yet I feel this experience has taught me a lot. More flattering terms may be used, such as ‘Teacher-Practitioner’, ‘Dual Professional’, or ‘Clinician Educator’ (Adams, 2011; McCullough, Marton, & Ramnanan, 2015; Meyer, McCarthy, Klodd, & Gaseor, 1994). This background means that for over two decades I have been extensively and enthusiastically involved in teaching medical students, undergraduates and doctors at all levels, both in this country and abroad. I have organized courses and been an invited speaker at a number of important national and international educational events, as well as having written book chapters and journal articles.

In the last couple of years I have been working as a course tutor on a large distance learning MSc/Diploma course in clinical neurology at UCL. It was in this capacity that I came to the Advance HE STEM conference in January at Millennium Point in Birmingham. My own oral presentation was on innovative techniques that I had used to markedly improve student engagement at a symposium in the annual PTES survey (Young, 2019). Barriers to engagement and inclusion are not unique to students—they can exist for the ‘Teacher-Practitioner’ too, and I was grateful to find support and welcome from the more traditional academic route educators at the conference (McCullough et al., 2015). The only negative finding I encountered was the too frequent use of the term pedagogy.

In my long experience as a medical doctor I am well familiar with the role and power that ‘professional words’ can have. Medicine has probably more of these than any other discipline. When used carefully they can shed light and accuracy. When misused they can confuse or be seen as a ‘secret handshake’ to outsiders, shutting down involvement with patients rather than truly explaining things and involving them. In the medical profession many terms are used which may seem baffling to non-medics, however they often have a genuine use in telling us something about a condition. Thus ‘Pseudopseudohypoparathyroidism’ may sound like gobbledygook, but actually describes appearances which look like those seen with resistance to a hormone called PTH, but where the hormone is working normally.

On the other hand, as medics we do have our equivalents of pedagogy-words which can be used to obscure rather than enlighten. Examples include ‘idiopathic’ (we do not know the cause of a condition), ‘mitotic lesion’ (malignancies such as cancer) and ‘functional’ (there is not a clear organic explanation for symptoms). Such words, if used sparingly and wisely can still have a genuinely useful role in the same way a pedagogy may. When used indiscriminately however, they can raise a barrier between the doctor and the patient.

The indiscriminate use of pedagogy and its allied terminology has become a bugbear of mine over the last two years that I have been more completely engaged in higher education teaching. Whilst I appreciate this is an argument which has been raised at various points over the years, before I felt it was particularly relevant in light of an otherwise exciting, forward looking and inclusive conference.

Firstly we have to consider what the term pedagogy is supposed to mean. Simple, one might think; surely pedagogy describes the science and art of education, reflecting the

description of the term in the 19th century by Henri Marion (Best, 1988). An alternative modern description of pedagogy, using an Oxford English Dictionary definition, could be the profession or theory of teaching (Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus 2007). However, the agreed precise meaning of the term has been contested over the years (Mortimore, 1999). If we consider the etymology of the term, some reasons for this discrepancy can become apparent. Many will be familiar with a basic idea that pedagogy has links with ancient Greco-Roman practices. The Greek noun ‘paidagogos’ would indeed seem to support this view, referring typically to a slave who would lead children to and from school. However, when we talk of pedagogy today we tend to use it as a verb. Thus, the equivalent ancient Greek verb ‘paidagogeō’ would seem a more correct word to use. This no longer describes a slave, but instead the process of leading, guiding or educating children. Some might view this in even more general terms, as describing the process of leading or guiding without reference to children. However, the starting structure of the word cannot be brushed aside: *παῖς*, resulting in the construct *pais-* or *paid-*. *Παῖς*, when used on its own, clearly means a child of either sex (Liddell & Scott, 1940). Thus many would consider that the associated terms such as *paidagogeō* can refer to either a boy or a girl. This lack of gender preference of course correctly reflects our aspirations of education in the modern world. However, a significant problem with such an interpretation is that *compound* words employing the root *pais* or *paid* were often interpreted as only, or mainly, referring to boys in classical Greek works. Examples of this from classical Greek literature exist, for example from Plato’s dialogues (Gurley, 1999).

A further problem arises if we challenge the concept of pedagogy being purely a verb. It has been proposed that pedagogy is more typically viewed as an ‘institution’ rather than as a process, and as such the original Greek noun term ‘paidagogos’, with its description of the slave journeying with the child may seem more relevant (Hamilton, 2009).

Might we escape the above inconvenient points about Pedagogy by simply stating that we use a modern interpretation of the word? After all, the term we use now is not identical to either *paidagogos* or *paidagogeō*. The suffix ‘gy’ implies ‘logic’, thus pedagogy could be viewed as the logic of leading children (Hamilton, 2009). Furthermore, one could argue for a post-classical view of the term pedagogy if one considered that the beginning of the actual usage of the word to have stemmed from early years of the third republic in France with the famous *Dictionnaire de pédagogie* by Ferdinand Buisson in 1887 in which both the science and art of education are seen as key values (Best, 1988). In fact however, the term pedagogy was used long before this. Samuel Johnson’s famous first full English dictionary from the 18th century defines pedagogy as a meaning ‘Mastership, discipline’ and ‘the rod’ (Johnson, 1755). I fear that that definition may still be nearer the truth than many would like to think by describing pedagogy as a divisive word that empowers the teacher, not the student. I would argue that we do not have the luxury of a purely post-classical interpretation of pedagogy. With the term ‘education’, we can largely ignore the Latin origins of ‘educare’, meaning to train or to mould, and ‘educere’, meaning to lead out (Bass and Good 2004). This is because education is widely used as a contemporary word. With pedagogy however, I would suggest that the gravitas of leaning heavily upon its classical Greek derivation is actually still an attraction, consciously or otherwise, when using the term. If that is the case we cannot simply keep reinventing the meaning to suit our contemporary need.

Is pedagogy the right word to be using at all for *adult* education? Many have argued that, given the derivation from leading children, the term pedagogy is not correct to use in the science of higher (or adult) education. Not only is the student age a problem, but the approach to much younger learners may embody a hierarchy, with the teacher teaching rather than co-constructing knowledge with them (Carnell, 2007; Forest & Peterson, 2006). Another term, andragogy (teaching or leading adults), or even a blend of andragogy and pedagogy (metagogy) has been suggested (Peterson & Ray, 2013). However, such words are not universally acceptable in education, and still leave us with a rather obscure sounding word to newcomers which does not really describe its function.

Finally, thinking back to the illustration of a paidagogos walking with and teaching a child, I believe something important is often left out. It is not the leading or the child or even the logic, but rather the shared *journey* between educator and student which I feel is of higher importance. This image reminds us that we ourselves as teachers should be honoured to travel with the student, walking in step with them, and developing ourselves too. Any journey can have its obstacles, but finding ways through can lead to growth, in keeping with a line from the title of Professor Strachan and colleagues' presentation from the Birmingham conference: 'Let's build bridges and diversity!' If this really is our shared aim, why should we set up barriers on the road? The term pedagogy does not slip easily from the tongue, but more importantly is not widely appreciated as a term by students themselves.

Whilst the term pedagogy certainly can have its place in selected circumstances, we must all be aware of the temptation of excessive usage—just as cooks can add too much salt to a meal, often with an unpalatable result. My suggestion is not to be radical and abolish the term altogether. Rather I would appeal to all educators to briefly question ourselves each time we use the term pedagogy or its adjectives, and ask if it could not be better served by a simpler and more transparent term. By this simple expedient I believe that we truly would be walking more in step with our students. If we really still feel the need for a term from antiquity to describe what we do, I would instead suggest the Latin word *itinere*, which simply means journey.

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