

Multicultural Learning Community Research Project

Church Mission Society and Missio Africanus

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OVERVIEW:

Introduction:

This project tracked the first year of introducing our African Diaspora route through the MA alongside our pioneer route which has been taught for ten years. There was a particular focus on the dynamics of the two MA routes running alongside each other and integrating together. Three of the six modules of the MA are shared across the cohorts and three are taught in separate cohorts. We also have one research day per term where all the MA students come together for shared input and learning. In bringing these MA routes together our desire has been to develop a multicultural learning community rather than simply parallel programmes. This piece of research sought to consolidate the learning from the first year. It has helped us both to improve our practice and move towards a deeper theological account of what is going on as we bring these routes together.

The research questions:

1. How can CMS facilitate a multicultural learning environment which facilitates reciprocal and mutual learning?
2. What can we learn from this that makes the learning environment and context more hospitable for all students?
3. What theological insights develop as students from pioneer and African Diaspora contexts study together?

The Approach:

We followed a broadly theological action research approach, designing the research as a team and identifying our research questions. We collected data and having reflected on it as individuals, we met as a research team to have a reflector conversation about the data. Having gathered our themes and reflections we shared them with our two external advisors, Helen Cameron and Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy, inviting them to help us to reflect further on our theology and practice.

The data was collected through the following methods:

- **Induction interviews.** We added questions to the interview which are routinely done at induction. Due to COVID restrictions these took place online throughout the first six months of the programme. Only responses to the questions from those interviews which directly referred to multicultural learning research were included in the project.
- **Reflections from students after classes by email.** We asked students to volunteer to write short reflections after each class. There were not as many of these as we might have hoped.
- **Evaluations of the postgraduate research days.** The research days draw together everyone from across our postgrad programmes (MA and DTh) once per term to listen to and reflect on a particular area of current research.
- **Module evaluations.** The evaluation questions from the end of modules evaluation forms in terms one and two.
- **Transcripts of focus groups with students.** Three focus groups reflecting back on the first two terms modules.
- **Three Interviews with people involved in delivering teaching who were not part of the research team.**

KEY THEMES EMERGING:

Positive Experience:

We were encouraged to find that the experience that students had of bringing together the pioneer and diaspora routes through the MA was broadly positive. Carla on the pioneer MA route mentioned, 'I can't think of any other institution that is doing this, has the courage to do this and that's why I love it even more.' Gloria on the African diaspora MA route mentioned that while it was the words 'African' and 'diaspora' which caused her to sign up to the programme, 'it's so much deeper than just those two words.' She commented, 'The environment at CMS, and the individuals who are on all of the classes and courses, just this amazing mix of individuals that are just doing so much amazing things everywhere.'

Discomfort:

Discomfort was experienced in a number of ways by students on both pioneer and diaspora routes through the MA. The students on the African Diaspora MA route were much more aware of the complexities of the multicultural learning community, being cautious about what they said to 'another group in a way that doesn't leave them wounded' [Gloria] and because they 'never wanted to hurt anyone' [Jessica]. The students on the pioneer MA route did not have the same awareness but experienced a discomfort in not always knowing how to speak and react. They were able to navigate some of this more easily once they had studied the leadership module together in the second term.

Posture:

The team identified a difference between the students on the pioneer MA route and students on the African diaspora MA route in their posture towards the conversations and course content. For many of the students on the African Diaspora MA route the diversity they experienced reflected the reality of the world they lived and ministered in. They spoke about the relationships they developed and recognised the diversity across their cohort. A number of students on the pioneer MA route saw diversity as something interesting to engage with but did not articulate the same sense of it reflecting their own lived reality. Students on both MA routes noticed how they were learning new things about their identity and history through the course and their interactions. There were a number of comments about how postures and attitudes changed through the modules.

Different diversities:

Some students thought about diversity in quite binary ways where others had a greater sense of intersectionality within diversity. There was a challenge from the data to see diversity and issues of justice in much more systemic rather than individualised ways. There was also discussion about the language of multicultural and intercultural. Comparing these approaches to diversity raised questions. Is being multicultural about assimilation? Or is it about the decentering of dominant culture(s) and allowing all to receive the gifts of each other's cultures?

The gift of diversity:

Students encountered difference in fruitful ways and had experiences of it as gift. Carla, a student on the pioneer MA route, described how the experience of the module had made her aware of difference and made her step out and have a different conversation with people who had been 'othered'. People valued hearing each other's stories, particularly in the joint leadership module where they pointed to the personal, reflexive poems from the first session and the presentations in

the final session. It was interesting to note differences in approaches to worship, for example one student on the pioneer MA route talked about how seeing different worship styles encouraged her, and one student on the African Diaspora MA route expressed how the sharing of diversity led her to worship.

Guest and host:

There were reflections on who was the guest and who was the host. This was perceived differently at different times: for example, which class was seen as joining which at points in the modules when the classes came together. The ways these dynamics of host and guest were broken down was helpful. The question was asked whether we could have a verb 'to guest' alongside the verb 'to host'.

Destiny Helpers:

A Nigerian Pentecostal phrase, 'destiny helper' came up in the data and was picked up in the team discussion. Destiny helpers are the people who connect you to the people you need to help you at that time. A destiny helper might help you see what you need to see or know what you need to know. There is a theological understanding that people need to be helped towards what God has destined for them and that they can't get there on your own, they need others. This connects with the philosophy of Ubuntu – *I am because we are* - which does not just highlight the importance of community but also the role of the community in fulfilling one's calling. As students develop diverse relationships, are they being 'destiny helpers' to each other?

Communal Pedagogy:

We began to see what we called a 'communal pedagogy' in the accounts from the research. Students in both MA routes started by looking at identity and how one sees the world. For the students on the pioneer MA route it was about how they are shaped by culture and taking time to reflect on their own position and also to be attentive to others. For the students on the African diaspora MA route it was exploring the history of Africa and appreciation it from a different perspective and seeing how their own identify has been shaped by the different narratives and counter-narratives. We saw the ways students named their learning in relation to others on the course not simply as individual learning. We named three key insights: the need to be explicit about the cultures and contexts present; learning comes from being together as much as from the content; the tutor has a role of facilitation more than being the agent of learning.

Faith seeking communal understanding:

Gloria, a student on the African diaspora MA route, commented, "We are the diversity that they are looking for, and they are the diversity that we were looking for." In this view each cohort is a gift to the other, perhaps an uncomfortable gift at times, but a gift both in being able to appreciate a different perspective and learn new things, but also because this is the reality of Christianity in the UK. In this perspective, theology is a journey of learning together towards a communal understanding of faith. There is a challenge to see diversity, not as an opportunity to encounter difference and experience different perspectives, but to learn to be the multicultural church together.

BIG PICTURE:

Towards a decolonising pedagogy:

Reflecting on pedagogy, there is a lot going on. We identified over twenty different ways we anticipated people learning from the data, from formal lectures and class discussions, to informal chats and WhatsApp messages. We also identified how there were different perspectives and expectations around the courses and learning. Many of the students on the African diaspora MA route were coming with an expectation of learning about diaspora mission. In contrast, the students on the pioneer MA route tended to frame it in terms of being equipped for the work. This is not to suggest that these are mutually exclusive but rather to indicate a different set of expectations and understanding. The idea of decolonising mission was one way we began to see a unity in the approaches with both MA routes. In different yet overlapping ways both streams explore how mission can be decolonised theologically and in practice.

Away from individualism:

Education is so often seen in individual terms. What we seemed to see in the data was ways in which students began to see it in much more communal terms. This challenged an individualistic worldview and encouraged students to see education as interconnected which, as highlighted by the students, is how they will experience ministry and mission in an increasing multicultural world. This is not simply that someone will flourish more because of benefitting from the wider relationships and learn how to speak for themselves, but they will begin to hear how their testimony sounds to others and learn in such a way which begins to move towards justice for all.

Reconciliation and Justice:

What we were hoping for and what we were glimpsing in the accounts was the ways in which a multicultural learning community was about reconciliation and justice. It was important for these things to come together, after all true reconciliation is not possible without justice. By running these streams together it was becoming clear that we were encouraging students to go on a journey which did not settle for models of assimilation when it came to diversity but found new spaces of justice and reconciliation. We identified these as 'brave spaces' where these difficult topics could be named and talked about. Crucially this space was necessary because it is the reality of mission in 21st Century Britain and indeed the world. It encouraged us to continue to explore how this multicultural environment can break the standard rules for multicultural dialogue and find a new space for multicultural community.

The telos of theological education and mission:

The question of eschatology and the ends to which education and mission are focused also stimulated much discussion. What does it mean to pray the line in the Lord's prayer that "God's will be done on earth as in heaven"? So often, particularly within an individualised frame, the hope of reconciliation is about the other side of the eschaton, but this research forced us to confront the question of what it means to hope for reconciliation this side of the eschaton. This was tied back to themes of destiny helpers and communal pedagogy named earlier. Ananias (Acts 9) was a 'destiny helper' who enabled Paul to cross boundaries and have a different hope.

Seeing the whole:

A key question arose as we reflected on these themes. In creating a multicultural/intercultural learning community what needs to be explicitly named and seen as part of that environment and

what is less significant? It was suggested that for most of the students they were only able to see part of the animal. Some had a trunk, some had tusks, some feet, some a tail, but no-one was able to see the whole picture. It would be helpful for us to find ways to articulate the whole in such a way that students who find that helpful can see it from the start. Or to put it another way, as students began the 'jigsaw' of studying with us, how could we give them the picture on the box?

NEXT STEPS:

As an MA team we identified a number of steps we wanted to take in relation to our own practice as theological educators and course convenors in regard to developing a multicultural learning environment:

- Fit our pedagogies into the trajectory from individualism to communal faith, and from difference through justice to reconciliation.
- Develop ways of sharing the big picture of our pedagogy with students
- Be more explicit about naming context in class – particularly within the pioneer cohort where naming context currently seems less common
- Reflect on how we use the worship time together and the PG Research days to enable more of this sharing to take place
- Find more shared spaces

We also identified theological and pedagogical themes we wanted to take up and write about further. These themes would include:

- Reconciliation and justice in multicultural learning
- Communal pedagogies challenging individualistic approaches to education
- The realities of multicultural mission and theological education
- Disruption, decentring and dissonance
- Decolonising mission education
- Frame mission education in terms of hope

We anticipate publications from a more academic output in peer-reviewed journals, to more practice-focused theological output such the publications of *Missio Africanus* and the *CMS Anvil Journal*, and more popular level output such as blogs and podcasts.

Pioneer Training

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