

Accessing the academy: developing strategies to engage and retain marginalised young people on successful educational pathways

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For young, non-traditional students, higher education pathways are often characterised by initial aspirations and later disappointments when classed, gendered and relational positionings conflict with students' identities and contribute to their withdrawal from academia. This paper discusses an innovative 'group encounter' that engendered an opportunity for young marginalised students to gain access to a successful learner identity creating inclusive spaces in place of divided communities. The central argument of the paper is that if we intend not only to widen access at points of entry but rather engender a space where academic journeys can be successfully completed and projects of social mobility achieved, there is a need to create inclusive spaces for young people in place of divided communities.

Key words: *affinity space, higher education, inequality, youth, marginalisation.*

Introduction

The National Equality Panel's report "An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK" (Hills et al. 2010) demonstrated how inequalities in income and earnings in Britain are high; both temporally in relation to the position 30 years ago and geographically compared with other industrialised nations. Income and earnings are inherently linked with educational attainment; and applying this lens, the Anatomy of Economic Inequality in Wales (Davies et al. 2011) finds significant gaps in attainment related to residence in social housing and other indicators of relative poverty.

In relation to GCSE[1] attainment, pupils entitled to free school meals were found to be 2.5 times less likely to attain grades A–C; and those living in social housing were 10 times less likely to be a graduate compared to those in other types of accommodation (Davies et al. 2011). Throughout the UK, socio-economically advantaged pupils, as defined by their parents' education or occupational status, are more likely to pursue full-time education options than to take other transitions; living in poverty, then, can be seen as a reliable predictor of educational attainment and related opportunities in the employment market (Crawford et al. 2011). Hills et al. (2010) argue that a lack of awareness of the enormity of economic disparity acts as a constraint on policy interventions designed to contribute to reducing inequality, and sociologists and economists have found evidence that social mobility has remained stagnant and even decreased over the past thirty years (Davies et al. 2011).

As Mackay (2010) argues, the distinctiveness of Wales, in terms of its political life and culture, has grown considerably over the last decade; nevertheless, beneath the imagery of the definitive

nation, Wales remains a complex and divided land. In a land of economic and geographical division (Evans 2010), it is the young people who are not in education or employment who have become the centre of ‘moral panics’ (Cohen 1973), where they are demonised in the media and political discourse. As Rosier (2009) argues, society now holds a schizophrenic view of children; it sees some children and young people as vulnerable innocents while others, including those categorised as ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEET) (Crawford et al. 2011), are viewed as highly culpable villains.

Such ‘monster hypes’ act to detract from the processes of inequality that exist within the education system and wider society; but education can be seen as both a cause and effect of inequality, suggesting that policy interventions could potentially increase social mobility. In Wales, the commitment to widening access was demonstrated in the Reaching Wider initiative which was set up to develop the educational progression and attainment of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The initiative focused on the idea of perception arguing that raising the aspirations of disadvantaged young people can translate into them perceiving an academic trajectory as possible, and consequently achieving a place in higher education (Hill, Hatt 2012).

Evaluations of the Reaching Wider programme and the corresponding initiative in England, Aimhigher, have demonstrated some success in widening participation in higher education for young people from marginalised communities (Moore and Dunworth 2011; Hill, Hatt 2012). However, the concept of ‘aiming higher’ can also be seen as problematic because the action of perceiving possibility places a responsibility on an individual to succeed and silences structural constraints.

In this way, entrance in itself does not expel the financial, cultural, social and psychological barriers that continue to act as a barrier to educational achievement (Reay et al. 2010; Warrington 2005; Bamber et al. 2006; Mannay 2012, 2013), and, although there was ongoing support for some students in these programmes, this, of course, was not available to all non-traditional students in higher education, and there remains a need to consider new ways of engaging and retaining marginalised young people on successful educational pathways.

These barriers to education were evident in a four-year research study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which applied visual methods of data collection to explore social reproduction as a spatial, psychological, and intergenerational process by focusing on the experiences of mothers and their daughters residing in a marginalised housing area in urbanised south Wales (see Mannay 2010, 2013). This research highlighted the cost of social mobility and the difficulties faced by non-traditional students entering higher education. In terms of mature students, participants began degrees but later abandoned their studies; the journey was too painful and they felt that there was little understanding within their institutions (Mannay 2012).

For young people in marginalised areas, the research study demonstrated how ideologies of upward social mobility often have little appreciation of the everyday lives and psychological existence of those left outside of the new social and economic order of reflective modernity (Mannay 2013). Consequently, the promise that young people can ‘have it all’ (Harris 2004) often conflicts with intergenerational and local expectations and, as the following quote illustrates, the experience of non-traditional young students is qualitatively different from that of their more affluent counterparts.

Adele: *“But, ‘cause I live at home, it was like I didn’t really get on with them but I wasn’t part of them... like their parents are paying for them to come to uni... and like half of them haven’t even got jobs”* (Mannay 2013).

Adele attends a university that she can commute to from home, and she is the only of her five siblings to enter higher education. Adele continually strives to minimise any difference between her and her family; however, the academic journey is one that is made with trepidation under the looming shadow of the possibility of changing, of becoming someone else. As the quote demonstrates, as well as the uneasy hybridity associated with being a border crosser (Lucey et al. 2003), there are fiscal and social concerns.

Adele speaks about having to work in paid employment alongside her academic studies; a disadvantaged and untenable position summed up participants in previous research as “not much of a choice really. It’s either poverty or failure” (Reay et al. 2001). These financial differences set Adele apart from the majority of her cohort; but there are also psychological barriers. Adele states: “*I wasn’t part of them*”, communicating differences in the realms of not only economic capital, but also of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998). Such anxieties may be heavily defended against with discourses that deny any sense of wanting to ‘belong’ to a different social class. As Bennett et al. (2008) suggest, detachment is a better notion than exclusion, and it is easier to say “I do not want to be part of them” than to consider the possibility that you cannot be ‘part of them’, but underlying this defence can lay anxieties about trying to pass as middle class, being accepted into the student milieu or feeling part of the institution of higher education.

Non-traditional young students, then, face a number of complex psychological and structural barriers to higher education. However, for academics and practitioners it is not enough simply to chart these difficulties and theorise the costs of divided identities; rather, we need to acknowledge the ways in which we maintain divided communities in our institutions and seek opportunities to create communities of practice. In creating communities of practice, it is useful to consider the work of Gee (2003, 2007) and the semiotic social space he terms an affinity space. Such semiotic social spaces are characterised by common endeavour rather than socially ascribed identities, and importantly, novices and masters share common space where leadership is porous and leaders are resources.

The following section outlines creating an affinity space aimed to engender access to the academy. Drawing on the accounts of delegates who attended the event, the paper evaluates its usefulness as a vehicle for engendering a non-hierarchical space within an academic institute. The paper assesses the event as part of a wider process of developing strategies to engage marginalised young people and engender university-based spaces that can potentially offer a sense of interest and belonging. The accounts of delegates are explored in relation to how such events can potentially be employed as a tool for both introducing marginalised young people to higher education and engendering retention and success in academic journeys. In this way, the paper aims to examine how the creation of affinity spaces can foster an identity of being ‘in place’ for young non-traditional students who often feel ‘out-of-place’ in the higher education system.

Interventions

The University of Wales, Newport, has a longstanding Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning provision which includes courses, programmes, and projects that target groups underrepresented in higher education. The university offers a range of flexible and responsive progression routes and is involved in projects of community engagement and regeneration. Although this work has been admirable and successful, there remain difficulties with non-traditional students both accessing and completing programmes of higher education. These difficulties led to the development of the Philosophy Lounge.

The concept of the Philosophy Lounge was envisaged and formulised by O'Connell who set up monthly meetings with a common endeavour for all participants to inclusively explore knowledge. The Philosophy Lounge has an open access policy and is promoted to academic staff, students at varying levels of study, and the general public. The monthly open forum is free to attend and, unlike the more formal courses, it is low risk and low commitment, with no requirement for formal registration. The format of the sessions is resonant of the concept of the affinity space (Gee 2007), and there is naturalness to the curiosity of questioning and the subsequent augmented thinking in a non-hierarchical setting. Although the meetings are characterised by common endeavour rather than socially ascribed identities, importantly, the convener is central in maintaining the sense of a safe space or, drawing from Winnicott (1965), a 'holding environment'.

In terms of widening participation, the Philosophy Lounge has been particularly attractive to young unemployed men, where many participants that would be classified as NEET have developed the sense of being a thinker and identities that are affiliated with academic engagement. In order to extend this space to new audiences and participants, a larger-scale event was envisaged. The event was a conference around the topic 'Battle of the Sexes', and the programme offered presentations and group discussion sessions.

The conference offered participants opportunities to present academically, journalistically, and creatively; prior to the event, there were a number of supporting structures made available. For example, assistance in presentation preparation was offered to everyone who showed an interest in the event, and there was an opportunity to discuss any concerns with the conference team. A common concern was what to wear to a conference, a point that demonstrates the ways in which academia is often understood as the inaccessible and unknown other. Delegates and presenters were sent a crib sheet of augmented thinking detailing respectful use of how to ask a question, which proved particularly useful when words and concepts failed some participants.

The conference began with small initial encounter groups that fostered an inclusive atmosphere and offered all delegates the opportunity to speak and be listened to and to engage in intellectual debate. Group discussions were non-hierarchical and fostered an equal platform for all participants, whether academics, students or non-academic members of the public, and arguments prioritised over positionings. Although the discussion took place on an equal platform, importantly, facilitators fostered the inclusive environment by holding the space (Winnicott 1965). Having established a sense of authority of the subject, participants were more able to engage and question in the following presentations.

The two key note speakers consisted of a student and a high status academic; this demonstrates the open nature of the event. Opportunities to present in the following sessions were restricted to eight minutes to encourage students to speak, and the programme was non-hierarchical as there was an equal platform for all – academics and students – at postgraduate, undergraduate and, importantly, Access levels, as well as those classified as NEET. Similarly, round-table discussions and question-and-answer sessions fostered an atmosphere in which all delegates were inherently part of the event. In addition to the conference, there was an opportunity to gain University credits through the Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning by contributing to a special edition "Philosophy Lounge Journal"; the submissions were invited in the variety forms including poems, reflective accounts of the day, review essays, and academic formats. In this way, this large group encountered the offered metaphorical, even playing, field where students and academics shared the floor in discussions, presentations and an academic research output.

Outcomes

The event was very well attended and attracted a wide demography of participants, and the reflections written for the publication output demonstrated the ways in which an inclusive space had been created. The following extract is taken from the account of a young single parent residing in the local area.

Sarah: “...at first I didn't know what to expect as I have never attended a conference and it was the first time I have ever been to a university. My reasons for attending were out of interest, and I was intrigued by the whole day; I was happy I contributed to the event and felt privileged.”

The quote demonstrates how the event attracted delegates who had not previously attended a conference or been inside an academic institute. Importantly, rather than feeling ‘out of place’ (Reay et al. 2010, Mannay 2013), Sarah describes how this initial encounter with higher education was a positive and interesting experience. Sarah writes: “I was happy I contributed to the event”, and this opportunity to contribute was a central premise of the Battle of the Sexes conference. Academic seminars and conferences are generally characterised by hierarchical conventions in which the audience, consisting of lay people, students and novices, is privileged to listen to the expert. In this case, the privilege comes in being part of the event from making a contribution that was both desired and valued.

In this way, Sarah's account communicates the ways in which the conference acted as a semiotic social space characterised by attributes of the affinity space set out by Gee (2007). As discussed earlier, the space was characterised by common endeavour rather than socially ascribed identities and, importantly, novices and masters shared common space, and this is the understanding conveyed in Sarah's account. Educational systems often tell us what, how and when to think, but this account as well as the feedback from the other participants, demonstrates an appreciation of the space and stimulation to think things through for themselves and to contribute to the thinking of others. In order to make the academy more accessible then, it is advantageous to create affinity spaces where young people can naturally engage and be engaged.

Another barrier to engagement with academic institutions can be the perception that the ivory tower is irrelevant and uninteresting; many young, marginalised individuals assume that university is not a space that they can appreciate: an assumption demonstrated in the following quote taken from the account of a young man who would come under the classification of NEET.

John: *A few weeks ago a friend asked me to go to a 'Battle of the Sexes' conference in Newport Uni. At the time I thought: "OK, I'll give it a go", but secretly thought I'd go for an hour, then go home as it's not my thing and I'll get bored. How wrong was I!!! Afterwards we didn't stop talking about it for hours.*

John describes his initial perception of the event (‘it's not my thing and I'll get bored’), and this could be attributed to his assumptions about academic spaces, but also to his own subjective identity of someone who belongs outside of this educational space. As discussed earlier, Bennett et al. (2008) suggest that detachment is a better notion than exclusion; therefore, it is easier to say ‘it's not my thing’ rather than to consider the prospect that entrance is not possible, that university cannot be ‘my thing’. In either case, the Battle of the Sexes conference facilitated entry into the academy and offered a programme that John and his friend ‘didn't stop talking about for hours’. In this way, the event provided new ways of engaging marginalised young people within an academic space, fostering opportunities to develop successful educational identities and opening up the possible new learning pathways.

Conclusions

In *Young people and social change*, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) describe the ways in which young people make sense of social inequalities in terms of their personal failings as an ‘epistemological fallacy’. A decade on, Baker (2008) reiterates this premise arguing the belief that economic hierarchy is simply a reflection of individual ability, and effort has become so pervasive that even individuals in disadvantaged circumstances are convinced that they reside in a pure environment where success is primarily dependent on their personal skills and shortcomings.

The Reaching Wider and Aimhigher programmes have demonstrated some success in widening participation to higher education for young people from marginalised communities. However, the underlying assumptions of young people needing to reach wider and aim higher can also reinforce ‘epistemological fallacy’ and place the onus on the individual to change, rather than accepting the role of the institution. The conceptual model underlying ‘What works?’ rejects the individualist discourse and recognises that, rather than desiring a more homogeneous student body or simply expecting non-traditional students to fit effortlessly into the existing status quo, institutions need to make changes themselves.

This approach has demonstrated some success in previous research in the North East of England where universities have adapted their approach to support mature students in terms of timetabling and finance administration (Bolam, Dodgson 2003). More recently, in England and Wales, a number of institutions have engaged with this philosophy and are beginning to assess the ways in which changes can be implemented in order to increase retention and completion rates among disadvantaged students (Thomas, Jamieson-Ball 2011). The Battle of the Sexes conference aligns itself with this ethos of institutional change where the onus falls on the academic institute to develop strategies to engage marginalised young people and engender spaces that offer a sense of interest and belonging.

The Battle of the Sexes event demonstrated how the creation of affinity spaces can potentially be a useful tool for both introducing marginalised young people to higher education and engendering retention and success in academic journeys. Large group encounters in a non-hierarchical setting can foster an identity of being ‘in place’ for young non-traditional students who often feel ‘out-of-place’, outcast and outclassed in the higher education system. For these reasons, the Philosophy Lounge remains an active affinity space, and there are plans in place for a Battle of the Classes conference. It is important that institutes engage with these collaborative learning spaces in order to provide opportunities for fostering differentiated institutional identities in which all students feel that their contribution is valid, desired, and significant: creating inclusive spaces in place of divided communities and enabling access to the academy.

Notes

1. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification awarded in a specified subject, generally taken in a number of subjects by students aged 14–16 years in secondary education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. GCSEs are at levels 1 and 2 on the National Qualifications Framework, and they are available in more than 40 academic and nine applied subjects.

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AUKŠTOJO MOKSLO PASIEKIAMUMAS: NETRADICINIO JAUNIMO ĮTRAUKIMO IR IŠLAIKYMO STUDIJOSE STRATEGIJOS

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Santrauka

Netradiciniai studentai dažnai nusivilia studijomis, todėl kyla konfliktas tarp asmens turimo ir jam priskiriamo identitetų. Identitetų konfliktas sukelia nusivylimą studijomis ir pasitraukimą iš jų. Šiame straipsnyje pristatomas „susitikimų grupės“ metodas, kurį naudojant netradiciniams studentams sudaromos sąlygos įgyti sėkmingo studento identitetą. Pagrindinė straipsnio tezė – turime sukurti ne vien tik sąlygas netradiciniams studentams patekti į studijas, bet ir visą mokymosi laiką sudaryti socialinio mobilumo galimybes.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: traukos zonos, aukštasis mokslas, nelygybė, jaunimas, marginaliziacija.