SRHE Annual Research Conference 2012: What is Higher Education For?
Shared and Contested Ambitions

Creating a community of learning: engendering opportunities for equality across the academic and student divide

Research Paper Outline

This paper is submitted to the SRHE Annual Research Conference 2012 - 'What is Higher Education for? Shared and contested ambitions' for consideration under the research domain 'student experience'; and specifically the research topic 'Changing student experiences of higher education and evolving identities of students'. 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 social mobility achieved, there is a need to create inclusive spaces in place of divided communities.

The background to the paper is drawn from a research study that focused on the experiences of mothers and daughters residing in a marginalised housing area in urbanised South Wales, United Kingdom; which explored social reproduction as a spatial, psychological and intergenerational process (Author a, 2010; 2011; 2012 forthcoming). The research was funded by the ESRC and was based in an area in urban South Wales, which has become the epitome of the classically disadvantaged council estate. The study drew on a range of visual, narrative and interview methods data production. Analysis of this data drew from a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial approach; and was particularly interested in Kleinian processes of splitting and defence as a vehicle to impose continuity in response to change; and the threat of fragmentation in family life.

One of the central findings of the research was that for marginalised, non-traditional students re-entering education, the emotional cost of social mobility is often one that they are unable to pay, and that practitioners and policy makers need to be aware of, and responsive to their situation so that retention and completion rates can be improved. The first part of the paper contextualises this research project and presents

two case studies of women that completed Access courses and gained places in post-1992 universities, focusing on their initial aspirations and later disappointments, examining the ways in which their classed, gendered and relational positionings conflicted with their education trajectory and contributed to their withdrawal from academia.

Social mobility is not without cost, as previous research with non-traditional students has demonstrated (Francis 2010; Reay et al 2010; Warrington 2005), and for mature students such difficulties are often confounded. Retention of non-traditional students is problematic and research synthesis has identified weak course match; unsatisfactory academic experience; lack of social integration; financial issues and personal circumstances as the primary reasons behind non-completion at the higher education level (Jones 2008).

As Thomas and Jamieson-Ball (2011) argue it is challenging to convert the results of retention synthesis into institutional interventions or a strategy that improves student retention and success. However, programmes such as the 'What works? Student retention and success' offer strategies emphasising the importance of collaborative, student centred learning and teaching, which facilitates staff - student interaction and enables staff to have a better understanding of their students (Crosling et al 2008). This approach can be seen as a move away from discourses of individual failure and a step towards an acknowledgement for the need for structural change within institutions; however, facilitating institutional change and providing opportunities to engender retention and success can be challenging.

In response to this challenge the second part of the presentation focuses on an innovative 'group encounter' designed by Author b that offered a metaphorical even playing field where students and academics shared the floor in discussions, presentations and an academic research output. The event was a conference around the topic 'Battle of the Sexes' and the programme offered presentations and group discussion sessions. The two key note speakers consisted of a student and a high status academic. Opportunities to present were restricted to eight minutes to encourage students to speak and the programme was not hierarchical as there was an equal platform for both academics and students; at postgraduate, undergraduate and,

importantly, Access levels. Similarly, round table discussions fostered an atmosphere in which all delegates were inherently part of the discussion and the arguments rather than the speakers' position were prioritised.

In this way the event offered not only a community of practice but a semiotic social space that is closer to the concept of an affinity space (Gee 2007). An affinity space is 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. In addition to this one day event everyone who attended, whether or not they gave a presentation, were invited to submit a paper for publication in an online journal. The paper could be in the standardised academic format, an art form or poem; and the content could either discuss a gender related theme or simply be a personal reflection of the experience of the group encounter. Importantly, there was also an accredited qualification offered for those who made a contribution to the journal.

The paper will assess the usefulness of the event and the subsequent publication of the journal; focusing on how it created an affinity space and the extent to which the format can be seen as a change in the institution and a tool for engendering retention and success. Reflecting on the conference and drawing on some of the published contributions, the evaluation is particularly interested in how such events can foster an identity of being 'in place' for non-traditional students who often feel 'out-of-place', outcast and outclassed in the higher education system. In this way the paper engenders a discussion about changing student experiences of higher education and best practice in relation to fostering differentiated institutional identities in which all students feel that their contribution is valid, desired and significant.

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