Negotiating Contestations and "Chaotic Conceptions": Engaging "Non-Traditional" Students in Higher Education

Trowler Vicki, *University of Edinburgh, UK*

Introduction

A study undertaken to explore the engagement of "non-traditional" students at university and the effects of this engagement on their intentions to persist or otherwise revealed problems with the understanding and use of the concepts of student engagement and "non-traditional" students. Given that both are the subject of considerable attention from policy makers, and that both are the subject of considerable resourcing, it would seem sensible that what is meant, and understood, by both of these terms is explored and that conceptual clarity is attained.

"Chaotic conceptions"

Studies of "non-traditional" students in HE indicate a concept whose edges are blurred, not through fuzzy thinking but so as to mask the ideological work afoot. This is akin to the "chaotic conceptions" identified by Marx (1973) and introduced in Higher Education research by Clegg (2004).

The Marxian term "chaotic conception" was introduced in the Grundrisse with reference to the construct "population". In contrast to "fuzzy concepts", whose precise meanings vary according to context and conditions (Haack 1996), "chaotic conceptions" are abstractions *[Vorstellung]* which require further disaggregation into simpler and simpler concepts *[Begriff],* unmasking the "rich totality of many determinations and relations" (Marx 1973: 100). "Chaotic conceptions" are neither simply sloppy nor accidental – they function actively to carry out real ideological work, disguising interests and inequities.

From a Critical Realist perspective, Sayer (1992: 138) distinguishes "chaotic conceptions", or "bad abstractions", from "rational abstractions". He argues that the former "arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby 'carving up' the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form".

"Chaotic conceptions" can, as Sayer (1992: 139) observes, be used unproblematically for descriptive purposes, but when they are deployed with any "explanatory weight" problems may arise as similar properties or behaviours are assumed where these may not exist. Thus, material differences between objects which are internally heterogeneous become obscured, and assumptions are made that what defines, or distinguishes, the object, will necessarily be causally significant.

Who are "non-traditional" students?

The term "non-traditional" student has been used uncritically in the literature for several decades, often as a shorthand marker for those seen as the intended beneficiaries of "Widening Participation" (WP)-type policies. Few authors define their use of the term, and most elide seamlessly between this term and more specific groups, assumed to be the real focus of their studies, such as working class students, "first in family" students, students from minority ethnic or religious groups, or mature students. Oftentimes, students in the study present with more than one of these characteristics (e.g. working class students, the first in their families to participate in HE, who have come to HE later in life) and yet intersectionalities are not explored, nor are differences within the groups (where some students present with multiple characteristics, and some with fewer, for example) teased out to develop a finer-grained understanding of the nuances within these conveniently homogenised experiences.

The conception "non-traditional" when applied to students encompasses a large variety of characteristics which have little of significance in common, do not form structures, nor do they interact causally in any notable fashion. Rather, they are included by virtue of what they are not, rather than as a result of any essential characteristic they possess in common.

What does this mean, for operationalising the term?

Interviews conducted for an ongoing study on *Engaging "non-traditional" HE students for persistence* indicated clearly that individual students consider themselves "non-traditional" or otherwise for a far broader range of reasons than could have been anticipated in advance. These may have little to do with typical WP characteristics, and may also reflect changes in identity politics as experienced by incoming cohorts of a diversifying student population.

What ideological work is being done by conceptualising "non-traditional students" chaotically?

Conceptualising students as "non-traditional" sets up the notion of a "traditional student" which is seldom defined, but when it is (such as Munro 2011:115) is often depicted thus (or similarly):

> *Typically, for most of the postwar period, the traditional university student was a recent graduate from high school with good grades and enrolled full-time. Most importantly, such students came predominantly from high socio-economic backgrounds that equipped them with the kind of cultural capital that provides a head start in the academic environment.*

Thus, the "traditional" student is the one equipped for HE, while the "non-traditional" student is by contrast "poorly equipped". Defining students as "non-traditional" thus positions them as "other" and subject to deficit, leading to them being or feeling marginalised and disadvantaged by their institutions (Read, Archer, Leathwood 2003:1).

Using the term uncritically and segueing into the particular "non-traditional" population one wishes to concentrate on also has the effect of rendering some manifestations of "non-traditionality" less visible, or less valorised, leading to a climate of where some groups are seen (or depicted) as being more deserving (of attention, of affirmation, of resourcing) than others.

Conversely, not looking at the specifics of a particular manifestation of "non-traditionality" leads to assumptions or projections of homogeneity, which in turn leads to insufficiently nuanced policies and strategies for provisioning, which may fall short of the mark.

In the cases of the students described in the paper, the examples which would most obviously have ticked boxes on the "non-traditionality checklist" were less likely to consider themselves "non-traditional" (or to consider themselves "non-traditional" in an unproblematic way), while the other examples whose claims at "non-traditionality" may have appeared more tenuous more readily assumed the label, if for less obvious reasons. In these cases, interventions targeting the "checklist non-traditionals" may have failed because the targeted beneficiaries did not define themselves as needing the interventions, while the other examples may have been bypassed for attention or resourcing, or have had the "wrong" type of intervention designed for them. Given that those most at risk of early leaving were among the latter, such ill-matched interventions could have had a double negative effect - "wasting" resources on mismatched provisioning while not providing interventions where these may have had effect.

Conclusion:

Concepts such as "non-traditional" are typically used in ways which may appear merely slapdash, but in reality often mask positionalities, interests or disparities of power that embody ideological ends. Exploring these concepts through the lens of "chaotic conceptions" allows the unmasking of this ideological work, exposing what is rendered invisible through these discursive choices. Focusing on real examples of students who define themselves as "non-traditional" in their own contexts for their own reasons reveals the gap between the assumptions of who these students are and how they engage with HE - and thus how best to design and resource initiatives - and the perceptions and understandings presented by these students themselves. This resonates with Sayer's (1992: 139) caution about deploying such conceptions for any purposes beyond simple description, and allows for unmasking the "rich totality of many determinations and relations" (Marx 1973: 100).

References:

Adnett, N.J. & Slack, K. (2007) Are there economic incentives for non-traditional students to enter HE? The labour market as a barrier to widening participation. *Higher Education Quarterly* 61 (1) 23 - 36

Archer, L; Pratt, S.D.; Phillips, D. (2001) Working-class men's constructions of masculinity and negotiations of (non) participation in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 13 (4) 431-449

Arum, R. & Roksa, J. (2011) *Academically Adrift.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Baron, P. & Corbin, L. (2012) Student Engagement: Rhetoric and Reality. Higher Education Research & Development 31 (6) 759-772

Booth, T. (2001). *Learning environments, economic rationalism and criminal* law: *Towards quality teaching and learning outcomes*. University of Technology, Sydney, Review, 3(1), 17–39.

Bowker, G.C. & Star, S.L. (1999) *Sorting Things Out.* Boston: MIT Press

Clegg, S. (2004) Critical Readings: Progress Files and the Production of the Autonomous Learner. *Teaching in Higher Education* 9 (3) 287 - 298. DOI:10.1080/1356251042000216615

Fredricks, J.A.; Blumenfeld, P.C. & Paris, A.H. (2004) School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research* 74 (1) 59 - 109

Haack, S. (1996) *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic beyond the Formalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harper, S.R. & Quaye, S.J. (2009) *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. New York: Routledge

juststroud (2011) *College Tips - Non-traditional students.* Available online: http://youtu.be/do2z3MVdXtQ

Leathwood, C. & O'Connell, P. (2003) "It's a struggle"; the construction of the "new student" in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (6) 597 - 615

Markwell, D. (2007, January). *The challenge of student engagement.* Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning Forum, University of Western Australia, Perth.

Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

McCune, V.; Hounsell, J.; Christie, H.; Cree, V.E.; Tett, L. (2010) Mature and Younger Students' Reasons for Making the Transition from Further Education into Higher Education. *Teaching In Higher Education* 15 (6) 691-702

McInnis, C., & Hartley, R. (2002). *Managing study and work: The impact of full-time study and paid work on the undergraduate experience in Australian universities.* Retrieved March 1, 2011, from http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip02_6/eip02_6.pdf

Merton, R.K. (1957) *Social Theory and Social Structure.* New York: Free Press

Munro, L. (2011) "Go boldly, dream large!" The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian Journal of Education* 55 115 - 131

QAA (2012) *What is Student Engagement?* The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Available online: http://youtu.be/AVrRlAFH_3U

Read, B.; Archer, L.; Leathwood, C. (2003) Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of "Belonging" and "Isolation at a Post-1992 University. *Studies in Higher Education* 28 (3) 261 - 277

Rodgers, J.R. (2001). A panel-data study of the effect of student attendance on university performance. *Australian Journal of Education*, 45(3), 284–295.

Salamonson, Y., Andrew, S., & Everett, B. (2009). Academic engagement and disengagement as predictors of performance in pathophysiology among nursing students. *Contemporary Nurse,* 32(1–2), 123–132.

Sayer, A. (1992) *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. Abingdon: Routledge

Thomas, L; Quinn, J. (2007) *First Generation Entry into Higher Education: An International Study* England: SRHE / Open University Press.

Trowler, V. (2010) Student Engagement Literature Review. York: Higher Education Academy. Available online: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/studentengagement/StudentEngagementLiterature Review.pdf