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Title Networks and reflexivities: Employing a narrative social networks approach to explore apprenticeship pathways into and through Higher Education

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Networks and reflexivities: Employing a narrative, social network approach to explore apprenticeship pathways into and through Higher Education

Background

In recent years apprenticeships have become a central aspect of England's skills policy. Over the past decade, several attempts have been made to create a ladder from vocational and work-based learning to higher level learning, generally through vocational higher education, such as foundation degrees and higher apprenticeships. Current policy in England has sought to improve the status of Apprenticeship by repositioning them within post-compulsory education. The current reforms are predominantly born out of the Richards Review (2012) which has argued the definition of what an Apprenticeship is and should be has been stretched to the point that core features have been diluted leading to a breakdown in the relationship between employer and Apprentice. Instead, the system is government-led and shaped by training professionals rather than employers. The review recommended changes to the delivery and funding of apprenticeships with a greater focus on outcomes and recognised industry standards, alongside a stronger emphasis on ensuring apprenticeships offer better career progression support.

The numbers participating in apprenticeship has grown significantly, yet the number of apprentices progressing to higher education is small and their voice unheard. Despite growing interest in stimulating apprentice progression to HE (Skills Commission, 2009), few studies have investigated the progression experiences of apprentices (Dismore, 2014; 2016). This study has developed from the value position of seeking to contend with the 'deficit model' of progression and widening participation (Thomas, 2011) to understand how apprentices' knowledge, experiences and perspectives can make a vital contribution to a university community. We currently know little about Apprentices within the higher education system – their decision to pursue higher education, the role and influence of their social networks, their social and academic experiences of higher education and the impact on their identity and sense of self. The changing landscape of both Apprenticeships and higher education means we need to capture these accounts of student experience better, depicting the lived, biographical experience of individuals in increasingly credentialised learning and work settings.

By drawing on the notion of a 'learning career' Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) highlight the way individuals shape, and are shaped by, their learning and the multi-dimensional rather than linear nature of identity formation. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theories of learning also acknowledge that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life, highlighting the role of communities of practice in learning and identity formation. One means to explore this is through Fuller and Unwin's (2001) work characterising contemporary apprenticeships as on a spectrum from 'expansive' to 'restrictive' regarding the learning environments and forms of experience.

Methodology

This study utilises a narrative, longitudinal approach to explore the experiences of Apprentices who have embarked on higher education, drawing upon data from several semi-structured narrative interviews with sixteen participants as they progress through the early stages of their higher education programme until graduation. The final phase of the study engaged with the wider social network of six participants. This paper draws upon in-depth narrative interviews with Advanced Apprentices who have progressed to higher education and locates these voices within their wider social network. The interviews with social networks illuminate how education and career decision-making is embedded within dynamic family, peer and workplace networks. Drawing on wider network voices to the Apprentices narratives enables the reader to understand the biographical and learning experiences, and contextualise them within their broader framework.

Analysing learning experiences, educational transitions and learner identity highlight the process of becoming a higher education student is relational, situational, and part of a web of complex interactions. The Apprentices entered higher education with identities shaped by their diverse educational, occupational and social backgrounds. The study has drawn on Archer's (2007; 2012) modes of reflexivity as a useful framework to understand how different approaches to reflexivity guide how people navigate constellations of education and career possibilities. This study reveals some ways in which higher education learning can contribute to establishing a way of life and the complexities involved. Insights from the social networks suggest that individuals adapt their approach to reflexivity according to the social situation, aspects of and stages in their lives.

Discussion

This paper will present some of the methodological considerations to studying narratives and the utility of employing a social network approach in exploring educational experiences and transitions. This paper will focus on narratives of two former apprentices drawing in the voices of the wider

networks. The narratives selected represent a sharp contrast in progressing from an apprenticeship to higher education and are likely to represent journeys experienced by other former apprentices who enter higher education. The study has found that Apprenticeship can contribute to a diversification of social capital, through the development of workplace relationships and belonging to multiple communities of practice which offered them the opportunity to explore what it might mean to go beyond their current position. These participants entered higher education with robust occupational identities and constructions of possible future selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) which underpinned how students managed difficulties in the HE learning experience. Long-standing networks continued to be a primary source of support throughout the participant's HE careers; reflective of the strength of network ties and connection to social and work contexts. The broadening of HE and workplace networks enhanced learning opportunities and career aspirations. Similar to the work of Dyke and colleagues (2012) found, participants negotiated different modes of reflexivity depending on the context and network ties. While this study is located within the English apprenticeship system, it is hoped some of the experiences and themes will resonate with other apprenticeship systems and understandings of transition.

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