The wisdom of knowledge: students exploring meaning and identity through participation in research (0018)

Jacqueline Stevenson[1], Sue Clegg[1], *[1]Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, United Kingdom*

'Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it ... and change it as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts' (Rushdie 1991, p.480).

United Kingdom higher education (HE) in the twentieth century was characterised by a period of enormous expansion, increasing the overall number of university entrants from around 300,000 in the 1960s to 1.6 million by 1997 (HESA, 1999) and almost 2.4 million today (HESA) [1]. The resultant pressure on staff time in relation to research, learning and teaching, student support and administrative responsibilities have all impacted on the time staff are able to spend with students: in the mid-1970s the average staff-student ratio was 1:9, today the current average is 1:21 and rising (UCU, 2006) whilst the average contact time for English university students is less than 14 hours of tuition a week with some students receiving as little as 5 (HEPI, 2009).

Although poor staff-student ratios and contact hours do not necessarily impact on either completion rates or the quality of teaching (Ramsden, 2008) the lack of interaction between students and staff has resulted in some staff knowing very little about their students (Clegg et al, 2009) and some students commenting that they feel like they are in a '*sausage factory*' (IUSSC, 2009). The personal tutor system has, historically, been instrumental in facilitating close staff-student relationships, however much personal tutoring is now either pragmatic, technical or reactive in nature (Myers, 2008), rather than giving students the time and space for reflection. This might not be particularly significant to those students who are able to '*reflect productively on experience*' (Yorke, 2006, p. 13) and plan for an often uncertain future, but many students cannot imagine their future or the 'possible self' this entails (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Stevenson and Clegg, 2010). This is particularly true for students with low social capital (Stevenson and Clegg, 2010).

Our paper reports on research conducted for the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics exploring FE and HE students' future 'possible selves' - future representations of the self (Markus and Nurius, 1986) including those that are desired and those that are not. As part of the research we asked students to reflect on both their past journeys into higher or further education as well as on what their possible future might look like. We found that whilst some students had strong orientations towards the future, including highly elaborated career possible selves, others did not. These students were either more clearly orientated towards the present or had only a vague and unfocussed view of their post-graduate future.

Whilst the FECs and HEIs involved in our research were implementing activities to try and help students prepare for their future, these were only successful if students were participating in very small classes or if the activity was intense. For the majority of students this was not the case. Of more concern was that many of those we interviewed had actually been given little, if no, opportunity to reflect on their personal journeys or to explore what their future post-graduate possible self might look like. Participating in the research interview was, for many, the first opportunity to do so. Consequently these students were using the telling of their stories during the research interview to reflect on, make sense of, and elaborate their futures. This is not surprising since '*the narrator reconfigures him-or herself with each story and with each retelling*' (Warren and Karner 2005, p.24) whilst the telling of stories '*makes*

---

[1] This includes both undergraduate and postgraduate, full and part-time home and EU but not non-EU overseas students.

the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed and the confusing clear'
(Atkinson, 1995, p. viii).

First were those students who were more clearly orientated towards the present and who did not have an elaborated view of a future career-possible self. These students used the interviewer's knowledge of higher education to explore future course and career possibilities. Second were those students who had views of their future self which were highly unrealistic or improbable and who used the interview to reflect on and separate the possible from the impossible. Finally there were students undertaking degree courses which might lead to multiple different careers (for example social sciences) but who, despite several years in HE, had not been able to decide on a future career pathway. These students were using the interview to rehearse the options open to them and to narrow down their choices. In direct contrast were students, primarily middle-class, who already had extremely strong orientations towards the future including highly elaborated career possible selves. They had made definitive decisions about their future careers and were actively building CVs which would facilitate the achievement of these goals. What made these students different from the others was that they had been able, and willing, to draw heavily on family and peers to elaborate their futures and, consequently, were using the interview simply as an opportunity to re-confirm their already set choices.

We conclude that Further and Higher Education Institutions can heavily influence the development of possible selves with teachers, advisors and mentors not only sources of possible selves but also a context for their elaboration (Rossiter, 2003). However, this requires time and space for regular reflection. The increasing pressures on academic staff has resulted in some students having limited opportunity to reflect on the uncertain future. In an age of mass higher education, we are in danger of under-privileging some students if we fail to give all students the opportunity to regularly reflect on and elaborate their futures.

References

Atkinson, R. (1995). *The gift of stories : practical and spiritual applications of autobiography, life stories, and personal mythmaking.* Westport, Conn, Bergin & Garvey

HESA (2010)Higher Education Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom for the Academic Year 2008/09. Available online at http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1578/161/

HESA (1999) HESA. (1999) *Students in Higher Education Institutions 1997/98* [Internet]. Cheltenham, Higher Education Statistics Agency. Available online from: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/818/251/

HEFCE (2003) *HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003-2008 [Internet]* Available online at www.hefce.ac.uk/ pubs

Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986) Possible Selves. *American Psychologist* 41, pp. 954-969.

Myers, J. (2008), Is personal tutoring sustainable? Comparing the trajectory of the personal tutor with that of the residential warden*, Teaching in Higher Education* 13 (5), pp. 607_611

Ramsden, P. (2008), The Future of Higher Education - Teaching and the Student Experience. Available online at http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCore/corporate/docs/H/he-debate-ramsden.pdf

Rossiter, M. (2003) Constructing the Possible: A Study of Educational Relationships and Possible Selves. In *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*, edited by D. Flowers et al., pp. 363-368. San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2003.

Rushdie, S. (1991), One Thousand Days in a Balloon, *New York Times*. New York.

Stevenson, J. and Clegg, S. (2010), Possible selves: students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity, *British Educational Research Journal,,* First published online on: 24 February 2010

University and College Union (2006), 'Further, higher, better' Submission to the government's second Comprehensive Spending Review. Available online at http://www.ucu.org.uk/csrdocs/csrsection26.pdf

Warren, C. A. B. and T. X. Karner (2005), *Discovering qualitative methods: field research, Interviews and Analysis,* Los Angeles, CA, Roxbury Publishing Company.

Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is and what it is not. Learning & Employability Series 1.* York: ESECT/Higher Education Academy. Available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/employability/id116_employability_in_higher_education_336.pdf