

Peer Relations in Higher Education: Constructing and Challenging Identities (0069)

The Widening Participation Strategy within Education and society has had an important impact in ensuring more working class, women and Black and Minority Ethnic students go to university in Britain now than ever before, although with respect to working class and certain Black and Minority Ethnic students, we are still a long way from an equitable system. With respect to subject disciplines student choice continues to be highly gendered and also racialised. 'Choice' of university is also raced and classed (HEFCE 2003) and all universities and disciplines are not equally valued by society. Indeed there remains a significant hierarchy of subjects and universities. Claims of "pointless degrees" and questionable (post 1992) universities raise the spectre of the 'authentic' (Taylor 1992) university, the 'authentic student' (Reay 2002) and 'authentic' subject (Bourdieu 1988) of study. Therefore whilst recognising the important achievements of Widening Participation the position of marginalised groups remains problematic once at university (see for example Crozier et al 2008; Reay et al 2010). Coupled with this is the criticism of the putative feminisation of Higher Education and more recently the overt criticisms of women's educational success as oppressive of working class men (Willets reported in Chapman 2010) This is the context of this paper which within the overarching symposium and the HEA funded project on which it draws (Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies –GAP) seeks to explore further aspects of the students' experience once at university. In particular the focus is on student peer relationships within the formal learning context and environment and how these impact on gender and learner identities. The paper will explore whether the discourse of 'authenticity' has implications for the students' learning and view of themselves.

At the level of school education there is research that shows the importance of the peer group as an influence on the learning process, experience and the development of learner identities (e.g. Astin 1999; DCSF 2010). The organisation of friendship groupings particularly along gendered dimensions in school education is thought to have an influence on social interactions in the classroom as well as gendered identities (Archer et al 2007). There is less research of this issue in Higher Education. Exceptions include, Brooks' (2003) work which has looked at the influence of family and friends on university choice and in a study of working class students in HE we found some indications of peer group pressure on learning performance (Crozier & Reay 2011).

Students' with poor school experiences often come to university with vulnerable learner identities. Moreover, students from working class backgrounds frequently have to struggle to assert their authenticity and their right to be at university at all and they often struggle with their own perceptions of their learner identity; women and black students are faced with further issues (Leathwood and O'Connell 2010). Competitiveness and notions of the good student have an impact on the student's learning experience. Within a framework of the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity and class, this paper will discuss the impact of this and the ways the peer group embodies or challenges these normative, neo-liberal performance indicators.

Boundary definitions and the imposition of identity allegiances and roles is another theme that will be discussed in relation to how the intersection and the performance of gendered, classed, raced identities plays out in a competitive learning environment.

Knowledge of course is a source of power; Bourdieu implies that gaining entry to university is rather like gaining entry to an exclusive club whereby you have not only to pass various tests to get there but once in and to ensure that the right kind of use is made of this 'exclusive' knowledge then a series of other tests are required. But these are not the end of module exams but rather an adaptability to or accommodation of what Bourdieu has talked of in terms of the control exerted over students and learning, such as the "distancing of teachers" through, for example, the organisation of teaching and the "professorial code" (Bourdieu et al 1994). Professorial space is designed to maintain control of what is learnt and how knowledge is imparted and what happens to the knowledge once it is released from the professorial hands. The 'discourse of cleverness' and the notion of meritocracy – the 'deserving and undeserving' student is a further aspect of this competitive process. Bourdieu et al (1994) also talked of the process of 'distancing' as reciprocal: condoned by the students themselves as a defence mechanism against what they don't know and therefore failure/exposure/ridicule and as a way of maintaining their independence. In some of the subjects in our case study there is a lot of group activity and group work assessment. Students have varying views on this and this practice influences students' views of their peers and their relationships. In other subjects the learning process is more individualistic and the relationship to the tutor at the exclusion of the peer group seemingly becomes paramount. In discussion of these issues, power relations and hegemonic identities will be analysed.

Key questions the paper will address therefore include:

What are the different notions of 'authenticity' and what is the impact of the peer group on how students adopt, adapt to or challenge the dominant 'authenticity' discourse?

Middle class students are more likely to display and operationalize social and cultural capital: Is it regarded as beneficial to the whole group? Does it work as a motivator or an aspect of oppression?

Does the fact that women are often in the majority distort or enhance the group dynamics? Are the normative, sexist power dynamics interrupted? And if so how does this appear and what are the implications for the students' learning experiences – both female and male?

The paper will draw on qualitative research funded by the Higher Education Academy, including semi-structured interviews with 64 undergraduate students across 5 different disciplinary/subject areas, student forum discussions, focus group discussions with teaching staff, and observations of taught sessions, in one post 1992 university. Theories of intersectionalities (Crenshaw 2003) and Critical Race Feminism (Wing 2003) will be drawn on together with hooks and Bourdieu's work to develop the analysis.

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