

'Go Higher for Lower': Blurred Boundaries and Possible Selves in FE's HE Promotion (0267)

Holly Henderson

University of Birmingham, UK

Higher Education (HE) courses taught in Further Education (FE) colleges in the UK have a confused and confusing status as providers of HE; they are outside the HE sector even as their provision supports and extends that sector (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Taking into account this duality of identity (Esmond 2012; Lea and Simmonds 2012), this paper focuses on the self-representation of providers of HE in FE, looking at the web pages used to advertise their HE courses. It does so in the context of Edgerton's reminder that understandings of HE exist beyond the academy (2005) Farber and Holms' (2005) analysis of US university promotional materials as revelatory of public attitudes to HE and Reynolds' analysis of community college representations in US popular culture (2014).

Below, I explain my methodology for this paper, and set out three common themes found across my sample. I suggest that a focus on representation demonstrates the ways in which our cultural and visual languages of HE are challenged and exceeded by representations of this liminal form of Higher Education, in a way that is itself representative of HE in FE's challenges to traditional HE. I also use the psychological theory of the 'possible self' (Oyserman, Terry and Bybee, 2002; Pizzolato, 2007), a concept which is rarely used in education research (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011), to interrogate the ways in which the expected audiences of these web pages are inscribed into being through the language and visual media used.

This paper is formed from a preliminary discourse analysis of representations of HE in FE, which is part of my doctoral research into the experiences of students in the sector. I have chosen 20 Colleges of FE which offer HE courses in the UK. The sample is not designed to be representative, but is rather explorative; as such, I have sought a range of colleges across the UK, from the broad areas of 'Greater London, Yorkshire and Humber, West Midlands, East of England and East Midlands' as defined by the Association of Colleges (www.aoc.co.uk), and I have used their directory of Colleges of Further Education to compile my sample. I include a table below to identify the colleges in the sample.

Comparisons to Traditional Higher Education

All of the pages I surveyed make comparisons to university based HE, often as a silent other to which a comparative adjective referred. This is interesting because the audience of the webpages is precisely those who have not experienced HE, and therefore not well placed to engage in the comparison. In offering an alternative to traditional HE, then, the pages were drawing upon an unacknowledged wealth of cultural knowledge. Every site uses a photograph of a student in the traditional cap and gown that accompanies a BA graduation ceremony; the visual language of HE is drawn upon even as the pages set out to offer something outside of or beyond that language. The possible self offered to prospective students is both one that aspires to the traditionally accepted language of HE, and one that seeks something outside of it.

I found three broad themes within the implied comparisons to university based HE

1. The 'friendly alternative'.
The FE Colleges often position themselves using adjectives such as 'friendly' or 'supportive'. In doing so, they mark out a distinction from an often abstract and unnamed aspect of university education that would be the opposite of these adjectives. Their claim to friendliness and support is often accompanied by images of classroom based learning; the implied opposition is to pre-existing conceptualizations of the university lecture hall. The possible self offered to the prospective student here is one whose vulnerability is both expected and catered for.
2. The 'real' alternative
Alongside the adjectives relating to support and care, there are consistent uses of the adjective 'real' often combined with the noun 'world' to form a compound adjective that implies an opposition to the more abstract and less practical knowledge of a university based undergraduate degree. This is a distinction that bears similarities to the findings of large scale

studies into FE student motivations such as Parry's (2012), which found that student motivations were 'instrumental'; this again contained an unspoken but implied contrast to the more abstract values of traditional HE. In both cases, the representation pre-empts the student, writing their motivations for education into being before they arrive. It also exists in strange juxtaposition to the images of graduation celebrations on the same pages, which represent a celebration of precisely the kind of intellectual milestone that the courses purport to work against.

3. The 'low cost' alternative

Closely aligned to the practical 'real world' values discussed above, this representation similarly emphasises the worldly implications of undergraduate study. Many of the pages use comparative adjectives such as 'lower', again with an implicit comparative object of university HE; the expectation is of a pre-emptive understanding of the high cost of undergraduate degrees in HE institutions. This reference to cost positions the FE student as one excluded from Higher Education due to its prohibitive costs. The combination of images of graduation ceremonies with promises of low cost creates its audience as aspiring to tradition whilst being simultaneously excluded from it.

This brief survey demonstrates the liminal position of HE in FE as a part of the HE sector, and one that both draws on and distinguishes itself from university based HE. In shifting the focus from the direct experiences of students and institutions as analysed by studies such as Parry's (2012), this paper interrogates the ways in which student subjectivities are pre-inscribed in the very pages that offer possible subjectivities to them as students (Youdell 2011), as well as the ways in which the language of HE is troubled and disrupted by FE's blurring of its boundaries.

<u>Name of College</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Web Address</u>
Barnsley College	Barnsley, Yorkshire	http://universitycampus.barnsley.ac.uk/about/
Hull College	Hull, Yorkshire	http://www.hull-college.ac.uk/higher-education
Wakefield College	Wakefield, Yorkshire	http://www.wakefield.ac.uk/higher-education
College of West Anglia	Wisbech, King's Lynn, Cambridge	http://www.cwa.ac.uk/he-content.html
Great Yarmouth College	Great Yarmouth, East Anglia	http://www.gyc.ac.uk/courses/highereducation/
Easton and Otley College	Easton, Otley, East Anglia	http://www.eastonotley.ac.uk/our-courses/higher-education/
City College Norwich	Norwich, East Anglia	https://www.ccn.ac.uk/higher-education
City College Plymouth	Plymouth, Devon	http://www.cityplym.ac.uk/university-level-courses
Cornwall college	Towns across Cornwall	https://www.cornwall.ac.uk/university
Bridgwater College	Bridgwater, Somerset	http://www.bridgwater.ac.uk/sector.php?sector=4
Bicton College	Budleigh Salterton, Devon	http://www.bicton.ac.uk/courses/university-level-courses
Bournville College	Birmingham, West Midlands	http://www.bournville.ac.uk/higher-education/
Dudley College	Dudley, West Midlands	http://www.dudleycol.ac.uk/highereducation.aspx
Buxton and Leek College	Buxton, Derbyshire	http://www.blc.ac.uk/courses/higher-education/
Central College Nottingham	Nottingham, Notts	http://www.centralnottingham.ac.uk/courses-and-apprenticeships/i-would-like-to-study-a-university-level-course.aspx
Loughbrough College	Loughbrough, Leicestershire	http://www.loucoll.ac.uk/courses/higher-education
New College Stamford	Stamford, Lincolnshire	http://www.stamford.ac.uk/departments/university-level/
Bromley College	Bromley, Greater London	http://www.bromley.ac.uk/degrees/
Newham College	Newham, Greater London	http://www.newham.ac.uk/higher-education/
Kingston College	Kingston, Greater London	http://kingston-college.ac.uk/undergraduate

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