



The 'Imagined to the Reimagined' Revival of Learning in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

In 1998 education was declared “the best economic policy that we have” (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998) highlighting links between educational attainment and potential earning power. It was from this point on that widening participation became an integral part of what education policy was about. Importantly, alongside this notion comes the assumption that economic, social, political and cultural injustices can be solved through education and up skilling. Offered as an opinion piece, for work that is on-going and expanding, this paper critiques the use of the most salient educational economic driver of the last 20-25 years, namely widening participation. This paper argues that the consequences of widening participation in higher education have been concealment of continuing social divisions, largely because they have been underpinned by neo-liberal rhetoric. It suggests counter-action through transgressive learning and teaching practice towards a consequence of remaking higher education that works more effectively for the disenfranchised and marginalised.

Keywords: Widening-participation; migrant women; transgressive learning.

Introduction

Part of my learning and teaching practice in higher education involves facilitating classes attended by large numbers of migrant women health workers. The module they attend is a precursor to a continuing professional development programme that sets learners up as lifelong professional learners¹ and prepares them for further higher education study. The learners are not graduate students and most take this course with a view to studying for a degree. It is often the first experience the women have of higher education in the UK. Many of the women learners are from minority ethnic groups and speak English as an additional language, so it is to be expected that they encounter higher education as not only highly gendered, but also as highly raced (Aspin, Chapman, Evans, & Bagnall, 2012). It is from my personal experience of teaching these learners that I have begun to critically consider the effectiveness of the higher education widening participation agenda for the disenfranchised.

Research suggests that participating in higher education can feel like a lesson in knowing your place and reinforcement of the limitation of aspirations. Such a position foregrounds this paper as it travels through insight into widening participation in higher education as an engine of the economy and exploration of the consequences of this drive, to a conclusion that advocates different possibilities through transgressive action.

Background to higher education as an engine of the economy

Intended/promised purpose

In the UK over the last twenty years or so there have been considerable political and economic changes in society, and in particular widening participation in higher education policy has become a tool for facilitating those changes. The widening participation agenda has not just been about self-improvement and improved employability, and expanded horizons, but about letting the previously marginalised into the Academy and giving them access to previously exclusive knowledge (Wilkins & Burke, 2015). Widening participation has also been seen as an effective antidote to alterations in market forces for overdeveloped (in relation to underdeveloped) countries. Education policy as part of economic strategy has become a form of social control (Archer, 2007) whereby the emphasis is on learners to engage with education as a way to ensure an upskilled and multi-skilled workforce that is reactive to a capitalist market (Fuller, Heath, & Johnston, 2011; Leggett, 2009; Watts, 2006) that has been impacted on by global shifts such as rapidly advancing technologies and decreases in European manufacturing. These shifts mean a requirement for larger numbers of highly trained graduate workforces, and hence the rise of the knowledge economy (Osborne, 2003) and an imperative to make it more inclusive to attract those larger number to participate (Archer, 2007). Essentially the widening participation agenda has emphasised that higher education is primarily, in the West at least, a driver of capitalist production. Therefore, those widening participation learners who participate in higher education then have to compete for employment opportunities with increasing

¹ Continuous professional development through formal and informal learning is a professional/regulatory body requirement for health care workers.

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numbers of highly trained graduates in a market economy that is subject to highs and lows, and is reflective of social inequalities (Wilkins & Burke, 2015; Mojab, 2006).

Effects of neo-liberal social control mechanisms

As more widening participation learners engage in higher education and gain graduate status they must compete with more traditional learners who benefit from more advantageous, socio-economic and socio-political capital (Chevalier & Linley, 2009). Social inequalities are replicated both in university admissions, as socially and economically disadvantaged learners face barriers to accessing places at top institutions, and in the graduate jobs market (Wilkins & Burke, 2015; Waller, Holford, Jarvis, Milana, & Webb, 2014; Archer, 2007; Thomas, 2001). Institutions from where an individual graduates matters significantly because graduates from more prestigious institutions experience better graduate outcomes (Archer, 2007). They are more likely to gain employment commensurate with their qualifications and graduate status than those graduating from less elite universities (Tholen, Brown, Power, & Allouch, 2013).

In economic terms, over the last 20-25 years the number of graduates has increased exponentially, and as the UK economy shows marginal, but unstable signs of recovery, there is suggestion that the supply of graduates is set to outstrip demand (Chevalier & Linley, 2009). In social terms, instead of widening participation agendas decreasing inequalities, as its rhetoric suggested it would, pre-existing markers of 'difference' and experiences of marginalisation persist (Wilkins & Burke, 2015; Waller et al., 2014; Archer, 2007; Bowers-Brown, 2006; Thomas, 2001). Given this, the ideology of social progression behind higher education widening participation rhetoric, the rhetoric of democratisation and the breaking down of social, political and cultural inequalities (Wilkins & Burke, 2015; Mojab, 2006), appears significant in promise of a thinly veiled neo-liberal vision of widening participation as a great emancipator and the leveler of society (Wilkins & Burke, 2015; Mavelli, 2014; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011; Archer, 2007); of its "perversion of the progressive vision of cultural diversity" (hooks, 1994, p. 31), which this paper takes issue with, and in so doing suggests alternative possibilities.

Exploration of the consequences of higher education as an economic engine

Mojab (2006) has written about the experiences and impact of learning – that is of social/civic and economic contribution through participation in learning – on the lives of a very specific group of migrant women. In the research Mojab (2006) notes that, despite experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, in general migrants are enthusiastic learners who are keen to participate in the large social engineering project of widening participation. For migrant women it is an opportunity to take part in society, become valued citizens, and be part of a democratic process towards social justice for all; and for them to acquire more skills and new knowledge that will assist them in finding better remunerated employment. Mojab's (2006) research is important because it also shows that the experiences of participating in learning left the women feeling distinctly 'different', excluded and essentialised. Other research has also noted that the sense of non-belonging is significant across the intersections of race, class and gender; and that those intersections are mutually constitutive (Waller et al, 2014; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005).

Individuals who already experience disenfranchisement are, whether through choice or seduction, participants in a neo-liberalist project of democratic citizenship through the rhetoric and policy of widening participation; but the consequences of possible exclusion and discriminations for those individuals do not square with expectations of social justice or egalitarianism in institutions of higher education. For example, Leathwood and Read's (2009) research on gender and higher education notes that there is still a substantial gender pay gap to be found amongst employed graduates. Women graduates are likely to be paid significantly less than male graduates, and are also far more likely to graduate from less prestigious higher education institutions, and in subjects that are deemed 'soft'. Interestingly though, these findings relate to women from working class and/or minority ethnic backgrounds. White middle class women from elite universities were advantaged in finding equally well paid jobs to their male counterparts.

Brown (2008) has been significant in writing about the problems of so called 'progressive neo-liberal' ways of thinking, and how they fundamentally move towards universal ways of understanding; and in this sense work to strip away social and cultural contexts in seeking to find commonality. Brown also identifies a self-satisfying arrogance located within liberal thought in relation to its "conceit about the universality of its basic principles" (Brown, 2008, p. 21). There is a problem within current 'so called' progressive liberal higher education rhetoric and policy in that the central tenant of widening participation actually looks towards non-cultural universality and commonality as a resolution to social and cultural antagonisms. The premise of a right to higher education for all assumes a commonality of thought that liberal higher education and 'knowledge' is a universal desire and social good, and that education is something people and the economy need and should want; and further, that higher education, 'knowledge' and the wider society and economy are neutral and blameless in terms of acting divisively (Leathwood & Francis, 2006).

Research carried out by Reay et al. (2005) and Archer (2007) illustrate well the contradictions of neo-liberal thought and policy on widening participation. They found that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds made particular sets of 'choices' about what institutions to apply to and attend and what subjects to study based on multiple and intersecting real world conditions - such as the economic necessity to work in paid employment whilst also studying, or because of caring commitments - that disproportionately impact on their lives in a negative way. For these reasons many working class economically disadvantaged students 'choose', out of necessity, to attend their local university irrespective of that university's ranking or reputation rather than study at a prestigious institution located further away. Reay et al. (2005) in particular found that for students from minority ethnic backgrounds, the racial

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mix of a particular institution had a profound influence over their decision of where to apply and whether they accepted a place. A sense of feeling unsafe and racially 'out of place' also had a significant effect on where individuals ended up as learners.

To a large extent getting a university education for widening participation learners can be an exercise in being confronted with what is not a possibility (i.e. access to Oxbridge or Redbrick institutions or safe spaces) rather than an emancipatory educational experience.

Conclusion

Since 1998 the imagined *Renaissance* of higher education learning remains subject to social divisions that seem to have been obscured by widening participation neo-liberal rhetoric and policy (Burke, 2002). Higher education, for the most part, has continued to orientate around and reflect the privileged in society. Prejudices and discriminations have not disappeared and higher education continues to mirror the economy as classed, raced and gendered. Moreover, policies built upon less ideological more economic purposes of generating more productive and adaptable workforces have failed to see that opportunities within higher education and the workplace are dependent on the intersections of gender, race and class (Burke & Jackson, 2007).

Within the contradictory logic of neo-liberal thinking around widening participation in higher education there are communities of resistance and change. Women's and critical race studies have been important voices within the academy in calling for 'knowledge' to be reclaimed (Burke & Jackson, 2007) by challenging the constructions of 'knowledge' and 'learning', and in so doing creating spaces for the disenfranchised to be heard (Aspin et al., 2012). hooks (2010; 1994) calls this reclaiming transformative learning through critical thinking and it is achieved by teaching and learning against the grain. Teaching and learning against the grain is transgressive teaching and learning advocating an orientation of acceptance and recognition of the existence and experiences of discriminations and inequalities. But transgressive teaching and learning also has confidence that transformative possibilities exist for progressive social change (McMahon & Portelli, 2010). Transgressive engaged teaching and learning is premised on liberatory and democratic values that involve a critical social justice approach to classroom dynamics, educational tools and content aimed at raising consciousness in the classroom of the social, political, cultural and economic situatedness of marginalised women. Such an approach has the potential to empower learners, such as women from migrant and other widening participation backgrounds, to create new knowledges by questioning social structures, and from there propel knowledge into actions as resistance against neo-liberalisms.

This paper proposes that through transgressive teaching and learning it is possible to relocate the ethos of higher education rhetoric and policy around widening participation automatically equaling delivery and experience of emancipatory education towards shared agreement that inequalities and discriminations have not and do not seem to be disappearing. From there it is possible to have a critical approach that questions neo-liberalism in a way that can be productive, and a provision for progressive social transformation.

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