

Fifth ECE Keynote Address 1

Pushing the boundaries: critical research in higher education
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Introduction

I have chosen the metaphor of pushing at boundaries of research into higher education to suggest that I think the boundaries of research are too narrowly drawn, and that we are not asking sufficiently challenging questions. Boundaries help to define, but can also limit. Extending boundaries, therefore, implies pushing them back. I have used 'extending' rather than 'crossing' because that might imply leaving the territory. I want to suggest interrogating the complexities of higher education involves being in multiple places and is a space where we can ask critical questions

My definition of research into higher education is very broad. It covers work that can be described as being 'about' higher education and as well as work that is 'for' higher education in the narrower sense of research into improvement, whether this is understood as making things better for students or making higher education more productive (Malcolm & Zukas 2001). For me the aim of research into higher education, is to come to an understanding of higher education and to ask difficult questions, not simply utilitarian ones about 'what works'. Although the what works questions can be important, we are likely to be seriously misled unless the grounds of asking are properly understood and theorised (Clegg, 2005a). Moreover, because we are insiders, researching into higher education presents us with particular problems in moving beyond our own everyday lived common sense. Posing critical questions involves noticing the oddities of the field, observing and questioning the rules of game, and this involves establishing a certain distance between us and our research subject. In his study of academic life *Homo Academicus* the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues:

The sociologist who chooses to study his own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not as the ethnologist would domesticate the exotic but .. exoticise the domestic ..through a break with his initial relation of intimacy (Bourdieu, 1988, xi).

In other words we need to make the familiar unfamiliar and to ask questions about what is specific to the field of higher education itself. Bourdieu's domestic metaphor is telling because when women began to interrogate the 'domestic' whole new fields of feminist inquiry were opened up. Similarly Edward Said's (1985) monumental study of 'Orientalism' first published in 1978 challenged our notions of the exotic. So to make our own familiar settings 'exotic' is a way to render them 'other'. For example Lisa Lucas (2006) in her book *The Research Game in Academic Life* shows how the relatively recent game of research selectivity is widening status distinctions both between universities and also within them, often to the detriment of both students and academics.

I want to suggest, therefore, that we need to question not just old ideas and hierarchies but also look critically at some of the newer practices, and newer orthodoxies; especially ones (perhaps like the idea of the student voice) that we have become attached to, and I want to argue that in order to do this we need a more extended theoretical and critical vocabulary.

My address therefore falls into three main parts:

- in the first I hazard some general observations and ask questions about the field and consider the theoretical resources available to higher education researchers

- in the second I turn to the sorts of questions we ask and take examples from my own research and use this to trouble the idea of the ‘student voice’
- and the final part I want to suggest some reasons to be cheerful.

Theoretical resources

Theory has an odd and unsettled relationship in debates about teaching and learning. It has recently resurfaced in debate about the scholarship of teaching and learning which has been criticised most notably by Graham Gibbs as lacking in sophistication and knowledge of previously published work. His challenge has produced much soul searching - but also some sophisticated responses including from Pat Hutchinson and Mary Huber who reject the notion of theory in the singular. Problems remain however (<http://www.issotl.org/2008proceedings.html>). Malcolm Tight (2004) reviewed the published literature outside North America under the headings of ‘teaching and learning’, ‘course design’ and ‘the student experience’ and found that only a third showed any evidence of engagement with theoretical resources. This is a remarkable absence. Given the complexities of higher education systems, the characteristics of students, the multiple purposes of higher education, and the number of questions that can be asked about student learning, it seems highly unlikely that one form of theory will suffice (or indeed a singular verification strategy). Indeed, the sorts of questions we ask are shaped by our theoretical starting points.

Much of the early research into higher education emerged, not surprisingly, out of a concern with the learning experiences of students. A dominant tradition of research evolved which has become known as the ‘approaches to learning and teaching’ perspective based on phenomenographic studies of how students and teachers experience particular phenomena. Much of this work focused on students’ intentions to learn, and conceptions such as deep and surface learning, starting from a qualitative approach.

The approach has been so influential that Mike Prosser and Keith Trigwell are able to claim that:

The combination of evidence that, on the one hand, a deep approach to learning is desirable and a surface approach is less desirable, and on the other hand, the learning context (and in some cases student perceptions) can be changed by university teachers and administrators to afford one or other approach, forms the basis of a powerful tool to improve the quality of students’ learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999 p. 98).

And, even more simply, Noel Entwistle to state that:

Increasingly, this research is indicating ways of improving teaching in higher education in ways which directly affect the quality of student learning. (Entwistle, 2001 p. 593)

It also inspired phenomenographic enquiries in to other aspects of higher education and proved immensely popular with practitioners

In terms of its theoretical resources, however, this approach is limited in the numbers of question it asks. Crucially, from my perspective the focus on conceptions of learning and teaching neglects all the broader social questions we might want to ask of higher education and higher education systems. These systems are constantly in flux and reshape what it means to be an academic and the nature of studentship itself. Numerous writers have pointed to the ways in which the idea of studentship is being subtly transformed from one who studied texts, studentship in a discipline, to the idea of studentship as the production of ‘autonomous/self-directed/flexible lifelong learners, and also increasingly as consumers.

Indeed, the whole policy discourse of higher education is now encapsulated in terms like ‘employability’, or in the Australasian context ‘graduate attributes’. These configurations shift what counts as knowledge and how it is judged - indeed, they are ‘changing the subject’ of higher education, as Erica McWilliam, wickedly notes,

rather than academics having a relationship to their own work or with their students, what increasingly counts is 'the degree of intimacy that academics have with the record' (McWilliam, 2004, 159). Understanding these sorts of trends makes the question of the resources for theorising even more compelling.

One example of how this is being addressed is in an important new book Paul Ashwin (2009). He has made the case for extending the repertoire of theoretical resources brought to bear on analysing teaching-learning interactions in higher education, and shows how by drawing on different theories (eg activity theory and symbolic interactionism) we can highlight different aspects of the teaching-learning relationship. He draws on Bernstein (2000), for example, to highlight the ways disciplinary knowledge practices are transformed into curriculum, and to highlight the distinction between discipline-as-research, discipline-as-curriculum, and as pedagogic practice. This sort of approach might produce a more sophisticated take on the debates about the research-teaching nexus for example by recognising the ways in which there are real distinctions between the two and looking at the hierarchies involved in the translation rules. Ashwin also argues that we can use Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus to illuminate the origins of different institutional cultures, and of course Diane Reay and her colleagues (Reay, David and Ball, 2005) have used Bourdieu to analyse and deconstruct the idea of student choice, and more recently in her work with Gill Crozier (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) to look at how the habitus of different institutions supports or inhibits the development of students' social and learning identities. Ashwin emphasises that different theoretical framings extend the range of questions and also that empirical research in turn poses challenges for how we develop theory. So neither his, nor my argument, is for some overarching theoretical synthesis but rather for pushing at boundaries and acknowledging that different theoretical perspectives will illuminate different problems

The questions we ask

I now want to turn to the sorts of questions we ask. I want to draw in my own work where I have taken seemingly 'mundane' and ordinary practices in higher education and asked both theoretical and empirical questions about them. My local examples have some characteristics specific to the UK, but the overall theoretical argument and the tendencies they describe, I would suggest, do not. Although I (like many others) have analysed what might seem perverse developments in higher education such as managerialism, what I am increasingly interested in are the contradictions within what seem like progressive moves and in the ways some 'problems' come to dominate our agendas and not others.

The example I'm going to use is research into 'personal development planning' which attempts to improve learning for students by helping them reflect. Personal development planning (self regulation in the North American literature) covers a range of practices whereby we ask students to think about what they are doing, to analyse and reflect, and then to plan future actions in order to improve their learning. There is a level at which this seems such an obviously good and sensible thing that it hardly merits attention. I was intrigued, however, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because in the UK it has been implemented across the whole sector, the only pedagogical technology which is mandated by the Quality Assurance Agency. Secondly, because it has attracted a flurry of interest around the question of 'what works' leading to the commissioning of the first 'systematic review' of the literature in the higher education field, and thirdly, because in my work with staff in different disciplinary areas I was very aware how difficult reflection is and that, moreover, that students 'fake it' retrospectively writing up what look like reflections, often the very day before they are required to submit them. So the impetus was policy orientated, research orientated, and practice based

When I first started thinking about personal development planning I rapidly realised it was what Marx describes as a 'chaotic conception' in other words although it seems like a simple unitary thing, it is in fact a complex and analytically incoherent amalgam. An analysis of the HEA 'Guides for Busy Academics' - short 'how to do it' summaries written by enthusiasts illustrates the problem. Personal development planning covers everything from dissertation preparation, work on CVs, the development of meta-cognitive

competency, reflection in numerous guises and so on, the list is extensive. Now of course, if one is a practitioner this all makes perfect sense, the repertoire of strategies one might use to engage students is likely to vary by discipline and orientation. As an object of research about ‘what works’ this lack of conceptual clarity and precision, however, leaves a lot to be desired. Put simply, in the case of personal development planning starting with the concrete deceptively simple question, does ‘it’ work, is unlikely to be amenable to sensible analysis, because we don’t know what the ‘it’ is. So the systematic review which concluded that personal development planning has positive effects on student learning, student attainment, and approaches to learning is not especially helpful, since it also concluded that it was not possible to know ‘how or why’ personal development planning was producing those effects reported.

The problem with programme evaluations is that they tend to find that some things work in some circumstances and not in others. Practitioners, of course, want to know how and why, because without insights into what is working, they are left simply with a list of interventions that are unlikely to be replicable in their context, and may, or may not, produce positive results. Despite the procedural rigour of the review it told us very little that is useful to practitioners, and offers no theoretical insight into the mechanisms producing the results because the object under scrutiny was not properly theorised in the first place. We do not know whether the reported outcomes were produced by the same or different mechanisms, or even if the term reflection is being used with any consistency, and given cultural variations it appears extremely unlikely that this is the case.

In contrast, my own research with my colleagues, Sally Bradley (Clegg and Bradley, 2006) and Serena Bufton, (Bufton and Clegg, 2007) took a rather different tack enquiring into how staff and how students understood personal development planning. This research produced a much more nuanced account of disciplinary orientations and practice. It showed, not surprisingly, that where practitioners had well understood models that stemmed from their own practice, for example in social work and education, then personal development planning as a pedagogy was embedded and successful. However, where it was not consonant with the values of the discipline or the profession, there were tensions. This was not just a question of personal orientation or disciplinary preference. Personal development planning has increasingly become associated with utilitarian notions of employability and understandings of pedagogical practice are being reframed in terms of policy. The discourse of employability shifts ideas about purpose of higher education with a focus on producing flexible individuals for the labour market. This is not to say that employment is not a legitimate goal in participation in higher education, but it is to note the way policy can reposition what goes on in higher education. Personal development and reflection has moved from domains, therefore, where it was well understood, embedded and under the control of knowledgeable practitioners, to one where everyone has to be able to demonstrate its place in the curriculum. This shift is part of the general issue of a greater internalisation of the audit culture; McWilliam’s (2004) familiarity with the ‘record’, being able to record and show where something has taken place, rather than seeing it as something that might appropriately be embedded as part of the pedagogy.

Of course, this insistence on demonstrating might have advantages for students and ‘make’ (and I use the verb advisedly) staff aware of what they are doing, but we should pause to also ask what might be lost. An educational practice ‘reflection’ with roots in all sorts of progressive educational ideas, many of which I would entirely endorse, changes its meaning by becoming the subject of an external and regulatory gaze. The dangers of inauthenticity in all this are evident. Reflection has become something that we all have to do, what Kathryn Eccelstone (1996) described as a mantra. Unsurprisingly students in our research described the process of ‘faking it’, producing something that looks like reflection on demand, usually just before a tutorial or hand-in date, and producing some pretty awful writing in the process. The students’ accounts also made us think about how time is experienced and gave us insight into why students ‘fake it’ rather than reflect and plan. Students describe their first year as being lived intensely in the present (as any parent or teacher can tell you). Most did not experience their present in terms of the future, so planning was a very problematic activity for them. It was only when the panic started, sometimes in the second year and even more worryingly in their

third, and when the future present of actually graduating started to implode into consciousness that they retrospectively recognised that planning might have been a good idea.

So what began as my mundane subject ‘personal development planning’ sent me on an excursion into:

- theoretical deconstruction
- a critique of evidence- based policy
- a meditation on time
- and latterly, with Miriam David, (Clegg and David, 2006) returned me to thinking about different meanings of the ‘personal’ and especially the politics of the personal in feminism.

This work does not speak directly back to practice at either pedagogical or the policy level, but it can be used as part of the meaning making against which sensible policy making might occur. In recognising diversity and in resisting unitary interpretations, it is also an invitation for practitioners to think about the meanings of time for students and the ways it might be different from our own.

So thinking about researching the student voice, if we take some of the features from the above and relate them to the idea of the student voice we can begin to appreciate the complexity and indeed the impossibility of the concept. It is another chaotic conception and indeed in the ‘singular’ a highly ideological one ripe it seems to me for theoretical interrogation. So I’m just going to suggest some of what Erica McWilliam calls the ‘wicked’ questions we might want to think about. The first is about the origin of the idea of voice and voicing which were highly political and to do with previously marginalised groups claiming a voice, the most obvious example is feminism. Women claimed a ‘voice’ as a political collective and that in turn was to transform whole areas of the social sciences and humanities sparking a chain of historical and other research into hidden voices. As soon as the political subject ‘woman’ proclaimed its voice, however, women of colour, lesbians, working class women and many others were quick to point out that the voice involved was particular – often white middle class and metropolitan. In other words the singular of a political project led to the articulation of multiple voices and the fracturing of a political, and any semblance of theoretical, unity.

If we think of the student voice the contradictions are even more striking. Voice is not something students (unlike in the 60s) are themselves currently collectively asserting. Rather in a period of low levels of student mobilisation others (reforming academic developers, managers, policy makers) are mobilising the ‘student voice’ for their own ends. Although it has become fashionable at some conferences for selected students to speak, as if they represented some sort of authentic voice. In my own work on academic development I have become intrigued by the ways students views get mobilised and reframed. McAlpine, Jazvak-Martek and Gonsalves (2008) argue that course ratings and psychologically informed research on student learning tended towards a deficit ‘teachers need fixing’ model. So students’ views are re-represented for reformist political effect. Given the diversity among students the idea of the student experience is not only a chaotic conception, it is also one that needs to be considered in its concrete historical circumstances when the student as paying consumer has come to be a familiar trope. Even if we think it is a good idea and a useful corrective to the power of academics to shape the curriculum, listening to student voices and how to capture such voices remains highly problematic.

The evidence based approach and most high profile is obviously the National Student Survey, but as the highly public spat between Paul Ramsden and Lee Harvey (THES, 2008) exposed the fitness for purpose of that particular instrument is contested. There are issues of what is being measured (satisfaction or learning), its reliability and validity, and its openness to manipulation in a context where league tables are a pernicious feature of press coverage of higher education, all of which make the NSS rightly controversial. Interpreting what students are saying in both pedagogical and research contexts rather involves an attention to the plurality of voices and the contexts in which they are speaking and writing. So as I have suggested reflection

as a genre does not ensure authenticity, it also involves performance to the script. As any of you who have wrestled with even small amounts of qualitative data know interpreting research data is equally difficult, which is why we need theoretical informed critical work. This is why much more work that attends to the complex relationships between policy, institutional framework, local culture and the voices of different students is now being produced.

I'm sure looking at the programme there will be many examples at this conference, so I'll mention just one example from the corpus of work produced by Carole Leathwood (2006) from her longitudinal study of students at London Metropolitan University, which among other findings point to the subtleties of non-traditional students understandings of support and independence not as a binary but as mutually interdependent. She draws on a range of theoretical perspectives in her work including feminist theory to question how current pedagogical and institutional practices position different students, and are likely to advantage and disadvantage them. She points out that the idea of 'independence' makes asking for help difficult, not being independent is seen as being in a state of lack or as being deficient, or as one of my respondents put it when seeking help 'I've had to swallow my pride'.

This sort of critical work is not going to deliver easy solutions for either policy makers or practitioners, but as I hope I've made clear the apparent simplicities of the evidence based movement don't either. Indeed because they pretend they do they are likely to be more dangerous. There is no one-to-one relationship between research and practice and this is not a unique problem for higher education. When we think about higher education we should bring with us some of the sophisticated theoretical understandings from other policy areas and professions and engage in some boundary crossing as well as boundary pushing. This may involve theoretical borrowings as well as dialogue

Conclusions

So in conclusion, I hope I've demonstrated that there are many, and to mind, interesting, questions to be asked especially about policies and practices that appear mundane and ordinary. I also want to suggest on the basis of this that there are some reasons to be cheerful. The complexities I have indicated above and the range of theoretical resources at our disposal make this exciting time to be researching into higher education. My arguments expand the range of questions rather than pretending we have all the answers. Certainty, it has always struck me as the enemy of any form of intellectual enquiry. Pushing at boundaries and expanding our critical repertoire is an exhilarating project. We have started asking some of the right questions but there is much work to do. My insistence on theory is, however, not vain glorious and, while I am not a relativist, I am cautious about my own theoretical commitments and would endorse a plurality of approaches in what is a young field. Val Hey describing academics' commitments to this and that theory notes:

how often their own cherished analytical rationality is broken up by glimpses into the imagination of more provocative thinkers. I have come to the conclusion that it is not so much that we self-consciously assemble all the resources for the making of research imaginaries as those vivid ideas (and frequently their authors) come to haunt us. (Hey, 2006, p. 439)

I certainly have multiple hauntings and associated intellectual vulnerabilities and I'd encourage you to have them too. The danger of my argument for extending the boundaries of research into higher education is that it risks collapsing into a sort of grab-all theoretical eclecticism, but that, in my view, is a risk worth taking. The bigger danger is that we stop asking questions that challenge us, and that we become complacent in the questions we ask about higher education and with that complacency comes the danger of accepting other people's descriptions about the purposes of higher education, and confining ourselves to research that pretends to tell us how to do things better. I don't believe we should confine ourselves to these sorts of questions, nor do I think it produces good research. That, at its core, is why I believe we should be pushing the boundaries and engaging in critical research into higher education and that is why I was delighted to be invited to speak at the opening of your conference

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