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# Dedication

*We dedicate this book to our students, past, present and future, whose learning inspires us to reach beyond the familiar, move out of our comfort zones and stretch our understanding of what constitutes 'teaching'.*

# Foreword 1

The title of this book maps the key drive of this innovative and timely edited collection. This is an important and well-crafted book by early educationalists and researchers Dr Christopher R. Matthews, Dr Ursula Edgington and Dr Alex Channon. The editors and contributors care deeply about the power of teaching and learning; the pages are fired up with critical pedagogical approaches to spark the imagination.

The introduction offers the framing of the methodological, theoretical, conceptual and ethical journey of the book; this is brought to life by the powerful personal narratives and learning journeys of the editors. The chapters that follow, by new and experienced scholars, offer a nuanced and sharp lens that probe structural issues that play out in and outside Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) classrooms.

In their drive to position education as a tool for social justice, authors' conceptual frameworks weave together across time and space to fuel creative, inclusive and critical pedagogical approaches that promote diverse learner and community engagement that challenge inequality. For example, social class, ethnicity, gender and disability, so often silenced in pedagogical technocratic discourses, is afforded a robust, theoretical and yet accessible lens that generates powerful narratives on the power of transformative and democratic approaches to teaching and learning.

The book provides a strong basis for supporting a dialogic, empowering and critical stance for the development of staff in both HE and FE infusing classrooms.

July 2017 Dr Vicky Duckworth, Reader in Education

# Foreword 2

When I help out at recruitment open days for sociology courses, I often find myself talking to parents who are sceptical about the value of the degree. If their children are borrowing so much money for their studies, what are their prospects of ever getting out of debt? There is no easy answer to this question – nor, in truth, can there be for any degree, even one that seems vocational today. Whether we are thinking about 18 year olds with a likely working life of 50 years or so, or an older person returning to education in their twenties or thirties, no-one knows what the labour market will look like in the mid-21st century. In 1968, when I went to university, computers were giant beasts in special rooms built and serviced by a small cadre of engineers and technicians. Today, I carry as much calculating power in my pocket, produced by a huge global manufacturing industry, supported by software creators, graphic designers and information providers. The only people who foresaw this were writing science fiction. Anybody starting a degree today is no better placed than I would have been to make a bet on what course would offer the best prospects of continuous employment.

The case for studying sociology, then, rests on the skills and personal qualities that it cultivates; skills and qualities that will contribute to the adaptability and flexibility of the graduate in the face of whatever the future may bring. As I explain to concerned parents, sociology degrees equip their graduates to handle information in many different forms: to interpret numbers and statistics; to ask the right questions when they talk to people; to use their eyes and observe what is going on around them; to read documents and find the silences as well as the words. In an era of fake news and unreliable narration, these are critical life skills. You can take them into any future context to address the perennial concerns of human institutions: *efficiency* – are we using our resources in the best way we can? *effectiveness* – are we actually achieving our objectives? *equity* – are we operating fairly in relation to both employees and service users, clients or customers? *humanity* – are we working in ways that are decent, dignified and responsive? While sociologists have been slow to recognize their potential contribution to the first two concerns, they have traditionally been strong contributors to the last two. Sociology degrees should be equipping students with a moral or ethical

sensibility that helps them to use their information skills to do the *right* thing and not just the most immediately advantageous. Such a combination of skills and virtues is a sound basis for whatever lies ahead.

The particular contribution of the present book is to the development of students' moral thinking. It explores the pedagogical challenges of disrupting incoming students' assumptions about who they are and what kind of society they are living in. As a nurse collaborator once said to me, the exciting thing about sociology is the way it looks at the world from a different direction – like finding Diagon Alley or Platform 9¾ in a Harry Potter novel. If someone asserts that some event or behaviour is a social problem, our training is to ask: 'Who says so? Why are they saying this? What is their material interest in the outcome? What norms and values are implicit in the claim?' Sociology makes transparent what others would prefer to be opaque. Developing that transparency is not necessarily a comfortable experience for either teacher or taught, as the various chapters make clear. The authors confront their own discomforts as well as those of their students. In the best traditions of the discipline, though, the chapters also tell stories about self-reflection and personal growth. They are less templates to copy than sources of inspiration for teachers. This book can usefully be read at any career stage as a way to see how pedagogic problems might be resolved by turning professional skills back onto the challenges of teaching and learning. Erving Goffman once commented on the touching tendency of sociologists to protect their own everyday life from the scrutiny of the discipline that they had joined. If we expect our students to tackle problems in workplaces, communities or personal lives with the tools that we are handing on, why would we not use those same tools to analyse and improve the process of transmission? The authors make a bold – and sometimes painful – attempt to do just this.

July 2017 Robert Dingwall, Professor in Sociology

# Preface

*Teaching with Sociological Imagination in Higher and Further Education* draws together contributions from 15 authors who all hold a passion for advancing learning and teaching in the social sciences. Set against a backdrop of institutional and cultural change across academia, the text provides critical commentary on several pressing issues currently shaping higher and further education. The authors describe practical and pragmatic ways in which they tackle such issues in daily classroom interactions, curriculum development, and through their personal pedagogical approaches. Case studies and vignettes are used as a means of sharing stories from the 'coal face' of higher education. In this way, each chapter moves beyond abstract academic debate, delving into the realities of teaching and learning at university.

Part pedagogical critique, part practical 'how to' guide, the text supports readers in a dialogical reconsideration of their own personal, pedagogical philosophy. In this regard, the editors' aim is to help shape a genuinely student-centred approach to teaching in the social sciences that will be valuable in a diverse range of educational environments. By drawing on C. Wright Mills' work as a broad frame for the book, the authors specifically explore the manner in which the sociological imagination can be woven into the development of higher and further education.

# Acknowledgements

The editors would firstly like to extend their sincere thanks to all of the contributors to this book for their excellent work in producing the substantive chapters that comprise the finished volume. Their creativity and insight have been superb, as has their collective patience with the reviewing and editing processes involved with producing the final version of this text.

This book explores philosophical and strategic approaches used to deliver what we, as educators, know to be truly inspirational, life-changing material to our students. As such, we also thank those social science scholars whose theoretical and empirical work forms the substance of much of our teaching, and adds such value to the educational journeys of the young people we work with.

Finally, we thank those students themselves. Without their enthusiastic engagement in our classrooms, our jobs would be an awful lot harder and far less rewarding. We hope that the work that has gone into this book will be useful to our colleagues teaching social sciences throughout various further and higher education institutions, but ultimately we hope that their students too can benefit from the value of *Teaching with Sociological Imagination*.

# Introduction: Teaching in Turbulent Times

As many colleagues working in higher education (HE) and Further Education (FE) will attest, we currently live and work in turbulent times. Old certainties about the purpose and value of universities continue to evaporate as we shift and lurch towards increasingly unpredictable futures. Many scholars have commented on the nuances of this process in relation to the neo-liberalisation of education (Meyer, 2014; Peters, 2011; Roberts, 2007). For instance, recently there has been an emergence and increasing prominence of objectifying performance metrics of teaching in HE, such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK, along with the gradual privatisation of educational institutions (Ball & Youdell, 2008). The controversies surrounding these debates often hinge on what can and cannot be measured in teaching and learning, and what interpretations of any such measurement outcomes can mean respective to the assumed quality of the 'product' that universities 'sell' to their 'consumers' (Avis, 1996).

While much can be said about the macro-political, social, cultural and economic consequences of these shifts in the direction of contemporary HE, the drive behind this book is to focus attention on the importance of learning and teaching within changing landscapes. As early-career academics, together we share insights that come from working for a number of years at the 'sharp end' of student facing HE. During our university careers we have seen, felt and lived elements of HE's turbulence as we have sought out and worked on temporary and sometimes part-time contracts, attempted to keep up with the shifting skill sets that are often required of academics and watched as senior university management teams devised and implemented reorganisation strategies, often with mixed success.

We therefore understand in the most personal ways the challenges of getting one's first academic position, and what pithy catch-phrases like 'publish or perish' can mean in different contexts for attempts to gain a healthy work/life balance – particularly in environments where teaching, and not research, dominates the economic reality and day-to-day routines of our work. In such contexts, we have developed relationships with many students and watched proudly as they have progressed. We have experienced the importance of high quality teaching and learning

for ensuring such development. And we have seen first-hand the manner in which pressures from digital transformations, student evaluation surveys, employability agendas and other shifts in education have reshaped the daily practices of academic life, with their attendant impacts on students' experiences and wellbeing.

Often, it is the seminal sociological texts that we return to with renewed interest to help interpret such developments, and understand how best to shape our academic work in relation to them. One such text is Mills' (1959) book *The Sociological Imagination*. In the following section we explain why the concept of the sociological imagination has served as a guide for this book, and where Mills' work intersects with the various teaching and learning experiences and philosophies that are brought to life in the chapters which follow.

## Drawing on the Sociological Imagination

It is widely recognised in educational scholarship that the transformational power of knowledge forms the foundation of the philosophy of lifelong learning (Brookfield, 1986; Freire, 1970; Illeris, 2002). More specifically, Mills (1959) believed that those with adequate, reflective knowledge and critical thinking skills could disrupt the domination of society's power elites and work towards modules of social justice. It's a key point of departure for much discussion of the transformational and liberatory power of education itself.

The concept of the sociological imagination offers a lens with which to consider the qualities of mind that enable individuals to grasp the interconnected nature of wider social processes and the lived realities of one's own life, in other words, to understand how 'personal troubles' are inextricably linked to 'public issues' (Mills, 1959). A reflexive understanding of how one's lifecourse is shaped by social forces beyond one's immediate ability to perceive – but, crucially, not outside of one's ability to influence, react to, or resist – is a key task for anyone hoping to thrive in an increasingly fragmented, fast-paced, globalised world. The pedagogical possibilities for applying Mills' observations thereby centre on the importance of empowering students with skills of reflexivity and criticality. And of course, realising such a goal is not possible without shaping our pedagogical approaches consistently around the specific needs of our students. But what do we actually mean by a pedagogy which embraces a sociological imagination?

Pedagogy can be broadly defined as the methods and practice of teaching and learning, more specifically as an academic subject or theoretical concept. However, as we would argue, teaching is more than the didactic approach of an educator; it's about facilitating processes of individuals' learning experiences in meaningful ways, through the art, science and craft of pedagogy (Armitage et al., 1999; Avis, 2009; Hargreaves, 1998). And these learning processes cannot be meaningful without the emotional aspects of socio-cultural and historical contexts, which effectively bring learning to life (Bantock, 1967; Duckworth, 2013; Palmer, 1998). So, whilst the practical methods of pedagogy consist of scaffolded learning

tasks and culturally relevant assessments (Ladson-Billings, 1995), they also should not avoid a strong awareness and engagement with value-judgements that form an intrinsic part of every curriculum and educator's teaching philosophy (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015; Biesta, 2011).

In this way, we argue that pedagogical methods, course content, and one's overarching philosophy cannot be separated, and instead consist of a careful balance between eliciting students' experiences whilst responding to students' feedback. Drawing pedagogical tools together with the sociological imagination is a meaningful way of combining practical methods of intervention with robust academic theory; it is then possible to interpret various aspects of our labour as an expression of a larger social struggle for emancipation on behalf of the students we work with. In this sense, the complex ways teachers' identities and emotions are embodied through emotional labour within the wider context of ever-shifting working environments, as well as the more specific classroom dynamics comprising the everyday experience of teaching, become prominent aspects of analysis (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Palmer, 1998; Rogers, 1986). As such, this book presents a number of ideas about how the sociological imagination might develop theorisations around this and other elements of HE and FE work today, and in the process draws out practical and meaningful ways to enhance teaching and learning towards the holistic ambitions outlined above.

Indeed, while we appreciate and support the importance of turning the sociological imagination to focus critically on the political, economic and other meta-level shifts in the HE sector, we have found ourselves at the centre of these debates with jobs to do and students to teach. The chapters drawn together here contribute to ongoing discussions about 'turbulent times' in academia, in the sense that they are informed by the contributors' positions at the 'coal-face' of learning and teaching. As such, our way of understanding and navigating the pressures shaping contemporary HE comes in the form of an exploration of the importance of *teaching with sociological imagination*, derived from a critical, reflexive engagement with our own situated practices, theorisations and professional identities. In this sense, rather than focusing on discursive or political moves to challenge neoliberal policies affecting academia, our approach here can be conceptualised as a form of 'resistance from within'. To put it metaphorically, as academia changes around us and we increasingly find ourselves trapped inside 'the belly of the beast', we need to find ways to support our students cutting their way out.

To that end, we have sought out contributions from social-science scholars who we argue are managing to tread the difficult path between being critical of potentially harmful changes in academia, while also pragmatically adjusting to the realities of this ongoing process. In exploring and marking out these paths we argue that the following chapters represent theoretical and practical ways to consider, challenge and critique the contemporary and future shape of learning and teaching, whilst also endeavouring to do our best possible work in spite of institutional, sector-wide changes raging around us.

To further contextualise the aims of this book, we begin by drawing on some personal reflections from our careers in academia to date. While we have taken

three different paths, we have each arrived at similar positions in how we think about learning and teaching. It is this practically developed, shared understanding of pedagogy, aligned with the sociological imagination that underpins this book and what we argue is our genuinely student-centred approach. And building on this we hope to provide colleagues with a resource for plotting paths through the 'turbulent times' we work in and that undoubtedly still lie ahead.

## Becoming 'Genuinely Student-Centred'

During our meetings to discuss the proposal for this book and throughout the editorial process we have repeatedly drawn on a variety of personal experiences to help us think through our orientations to teaching and learning. While we adopt different styles and prefer different pedagogical tools, where all three of us share common ground is in our passion for achieving a genuinely student-centred approach. We use the word 'genuine' here as a means of marking out the difference between the often marketised, PR rhetoric of student-centredness and the reality of holding such an orientation as a central feature of one's day-to-day practices in HE. In the following three accounts, we outline significant lessons that shaped our development in this regard. They are intended to provide colleagues with an insight into key ways to consider student-centred pedagogy as well as indicating the tone and aims of this book. In sharing these stories with you we also hope to mirror the dialogue we aim to create when teaching in a democratic and student-centred environment.

## Christopher's Account: 'Yes, but What Are YOU Going to Do?'

My first official lecturing post outside of assisting my PhD supervisor with his teaching was at a college in Nottingham, UK. During this time I was fortunate enough to be given the freedom to lead a module largely based on my area of research, and over three years I was provided with enough space to refine the curricular content while at the same time developing my teaching ability. I had some great feedback from staff and students alike and looking back I see some of the formative steps that I was taking in developing my own pedagogical philosophy and style. One moment in this process still stands out to me, and I have drawn on this experience throughout my career to help work through some of the more challenging issues I have faced in terms of learning and teaching.

The programme's external examiner was visiting to ratify the marks we had awarded. At this time I had no clue that such meetings even existed, let alone how seriously institutions took them. I rolled into the meeting wearing shorts and a t-shirt (it was summer after all) to find my colleagues all in formal work wear. I remember thinking that I'd not grasped the importance of this event and while I could not

sharpen my clothing I certainly tried to sharpen my mind. So, I set about taking in as much information as possible to help me prepare for what might lie ahead.

The day played out much like all the external examiner events that I have been involved in since; a positive and encouraging process of reflecting on the critical commentary of a senior colleague who shares a passion for educating. I learned a lot that day, although the most crucial of these lessons came when I was asked to describe how my module had gone. I'd considered the individual lectures and made notes on how they could be improved next year, but I had not at that point thought about the module as a whole. I suggested that it had gone well, but that 'some of the students didn't quite get all of the theory' I was delivering to them. My focus when explaining this was on the students who had poor attendance, or had not kept up with the assigned readings, yet the external examiner pulled me up on my comment; 'well yes, students don't always attend and they often won't do all the readings, but what are *you* going to do?' Initially this struck me as a little odd. What am I going to do to make them attend? What am I going to do to make them read? Surely it was the students who had not held up their side of the teaching and learning relationship?

Through pushing me to reconsider my role in this relationship the external examiner flicked a pedagogical switch for me. While it is certainly necessary for students to understand and fulfil their side of the teaching interactions, I now understood the central role that I occupied in enabling them to do this. Furthermore, I was now armed with a way of understanding teaching and learning which, rather than accepting certain factors as outside of my control, focuses on understanding and developing the various ways that I can have positive impacts on students' behaviours. With hindsight, informed by years of teaching and a more formal education in pedagogy, this seems obvious now. Of course I should be concerned with the manner in which my actions can help students make the correct choices, even if those choices are not directly under my control. Because of this early lesson in pedagogical orientation I have a 'go to' position when issues arise with student attendance, engagement, or attainment: what can I do better to help them?

This simple way of considering teaching and learning has led to me solving and managing a variety of pedagogical problems that others had considered to be outside of their control. I find this orientation provides me with an almost endless supply of energy with which to confront the hurdles and stumbling blocks that our students face. It might seem obvious that someone involved in education might adopt such a stance. But my experience in various HE institutions has demonstrated that this is often not the case.

In my current position as a senior lecturer and undergraduate course leader at the University of Brighton (at the time of writing) I am able to ensure that this pedagogical orientation is employed across the learning and teaching on my degree programme. I have seen first-hand the positive manner in which students respond when one's focus is shifted in this way. I have also seen similar good practice during my own experiences of being an external examiner at the University of Bedford and Sheffield Hallam University. And I still draw on this pedagogical moment to help guide colleagues in reorienting themselves to what I believe to be a more positive manner of conceptualising the lecturer's role in genuinely student-centred learning and teaching.

## Ursula's Account: 'My Student-Centred World Shifted on Its Axis'

Like many mature students, my own learning journey has been 'colourful' and might not be defined as traditional. After a 15-year career in various commercial-sector jobs (in England) I pursued my passion to teach. My jobs included sales insurance, call-centres, merchandising, accountancy, hospitality and many others; none were rewarding and often I wouldn't stay long before moving on, hopeful of 'greener grass'. Inevitably, this didn't appear and having left school with few qualifications, options were limited. Like many adult learners, my learning evolved: an informal evening-class led to an undergraduate degree, Diploma in teaching, Masters and eventually a PhD in Education. Despite the financial and emotional challenges of being a mature, female student in an environment not yet 'ready' for me, learning about learning became my obsession.

Throughout this journey, inequalities I witness (and experience) strengthen my belief in the transformative power of learning. My use of the sociological imagination provides new insights into past workplace experiences as a tertiary teacher and adds new meaning to the processes of lifelong learning. Over the past 10 years I have facilitated diverse types of adult learning – in large lecture auditoriums, smaller groups and individually. These include English language courses for vulnerable young people at immigration centres, practical workshops at Adult Education Centres, psychology and sociology at vocational colleges, and research methodology and writing courses within teacher-educator programmes at universities. Whether paid or voluntary, virtual or face-to-face, my teaching and research is fused with, and motivated by a sense of social justice and student-centredness.

After completing my PhD, I moved to New Zealand and for two years I taught part-time as a University Lecturer in teacher-education. Here, my student-centred world shifted on its axis. Compared to my experiences in the UK, quality control mechanisms set up to refine student-centred data outcomes like external examiner's meetings and other surveillance strategies were underdeveloped. Student evaluation questionnaires had only recently been employed and in this context seen mainly as a method of lecturers seeking recognition for pedagogical 'success'. My new perspective changed my perception of student-centredness – bringing it onto a continuum with educational cultures positioned along a pathway arguably driven by a global competitive market.

I realised how I had previously taken student-centredness for granted, along with the community of practice that often goes alongside it. As an independent scholar, I now have freedom to pursue freelance research projects which explore and encourage a focus on university teaching quality – and share my social justice objectives. I continue to teach technology and writing at local adult education centres and engage in volunteer teaching for adult literacy charities. In practical ways I incorporate the sociological imagination into my teaching by encouraging my students to draw on their personal contexts and backgrounds for successful learning; by choosing topics for their assignments, engaging in peer-review and

by co-writing scholarly work together. Overall, my teaching philosophy centres on my students' needs, but balancing such complexities with institutional and economic objectives can be challenging.

My years of different types of teaching have encouraged me to pay attention to different kinds of interpretations because by mixing and representing numerous learning theories, emotional complexities that are often hidden can be illuminated. For me, this is what student-centredness is all about; reflecting on this emotional dimension within the learning-teaching exchange is valuable in pursing student-centred strategies because as my research suggests, our emotions are intrinsically linked to learning outcomes.

Teaching in New Zealand brought into sharp contrast aspects of my UK teaching that I had previously taken for granted. Ironically, it was only in its absence that I recognised I had become desensitised to the constant pressures from a student-centredness that exists within a society of consumerism with responsibilities of quality, accountability and risks of litigation that go alongside these burdens. Undoubtedly, an increasing awareness of consumer rights in New Zealand is slowly changing the balance of empowerment, but my research indicates significant challenges lay ahead.

One example of how Aotearoa New Zealand might address these challenges is through research-informed, practical applications that embrace Māori philosophy *ako* – which means both to learn and to teach. The student/teacher relationship is interpreted not as hierarchical, but symbiotic. If my UK teaching experience offers some insights into the future of New Zealand's education systems, this culturally sensitive approach could be a valuable focus for comparative research.

## Alex's Account: Questioning the Centrality of My Own Knowledge

Immediately upon completing my PhD, and bringing to an end 20 years of formal, full-time education, I began working at a higher education institution in South London. I moved to the borough of Lewisham to take up this, my first full-time teaching post, which concurrently gave me my first experience of what life was like in a multi-ethnic urban community. While I'd lived in a fairly diverse area while studying in Leicestershire in the East Midlands over the previous few years, this had largely been a function of the cosmopolitan, (mostly) middle-class student body I was part of. Life in Lewisham was a far cry from Leicestershire; as with many areas of London, its diversity was shot through with economic deprivation, such that ethnicity overlapped visibly with social class. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 UK-wide summer riots, and with the slow but unmistakable gentrification of this and other boroughs underway, I soon became aware of the unique perspective that my life as a socially mobile, middle-class, professionally employed, white man moving into such an urban space afforded me, vis-à-vis the vastly different life experiences of many of my neighbours.

While this dislocating transition offered many opportunities for critical self-reflection, it would impact on my ontological position in a particularly profound way when I was eventually forced to 'confront my whiteness' in the context of my job. As one of two sociologists lecturing on the multi-disciplinary degree I was employed to teach, it eventually fell to me to deliver lectures on the subject of race and ethnicity. Here, I remember feeling like a great imposter as I prepared to lecture (particularly) working-class, black and minority ethnic students about race and racism. What could I, from my position of significant social privilege, teach these young men and women about a social problem they may very well have struggled with daily for their entire lives, which quite likely could carry the direst of consequences for them, and of which I had literally no personal understanding?

Engaging with the facts of my whiteness in this way was unsettling on two fronts. Firstly, it involved a more honest, critical reflection on my personal privilege, and the lack of understanding this afforded me, than I'd experienced before. As such, I found that I could not teach lessons on race without overtly foregrounding the incomplete nature of my own knowledge about the topic in question. Rather than continue to trust in my ability to intellectualise and communicate abstract academic ideas, as I had been trained to do during my doctoral program, I found that instead I needed to build my pedagogical approach upon a dialogue between a critique of my own limited subjectivity and an effort to prioritise students' voices in the classroom, coupled with a more reflective reading of critical social theory and research. This made for a clear departure from the more depersonalised, wholly 'research-informed' approach to teaching I was otherwise given to using and with which I felt most comfortable.

While there is much that could be said about such methods (see Webb & Ukoumunne, this volume, for a detailed account of a similar, yet more robustly conceptualised approach to teaching about race and racism), for the purposes of this vignette I focus instead on the second, wider effect of this experience. That is, in a more general sense it led me to question the centrality of my own knowledge, expertise and status as the basis for my authority as a lecturer altogether. Unlike most other intellectual challenges I'd faced in my life to date, teaching on this topic required a self-conscious decision to centralise my students' perspectives in what I delivered in the classroom, which would soon become a regular feature of the rest of my teaching. In doing so, I began to ask myself a series of questions. How might students' specific experiences help them understand or recognise the issues I was trying to teach them about? What intellectual tools would be helpful to them in grappling with the specific effects these phenomena had on their own lives? And how could I, as their lecturer, create opportunities for students to develop such critical competencies in ways that would be most useful for them moving forward?

As I have come to understand it, answering these types of questions – whether one is teaching across a social divide involving one's own embodied privilege or not – requires greater attention to one's skills as a lecturer than one's grasp of subject knowledge. Specifically, these skills involve listening to, empathising with, and knowing when and how to prioritise the subjectivity of one's students in

lesson delivery and curriculum design. They include reflexivity and flexibility, and a degree of humility that is not always compatible with the classic, hierarchal model of teacher–student relationships that prioritise formal markers of academic expertise. But when they are implemented effectively, to me these skills become the most practical manifestation of the occupational reflexivity often discussed in professional accreditation criteria, or taught to us when studying for our own vocational qualifications. By meeting students 'where they are' with lessons that fit 'what they need', lecturing becomes, in my view, truly student-centred.

We include our three stories in the belief that they will resonate with many readers' experiences of teaching and learning. Each of us articulates a particularly important situation that triggered a reflection upon who we are as teachers and where our teaching philosophies began to be formed. For Christopher it was entering the room for a formal meeting unexpectedly feeling literally and emotionally 'under-dressed'; for Ursula it was a move to an overseas position that brought into sharp contrast the absence of an audit culture so embedded in her previous roles in the UK education system; and for Alex, it was the challenges he overcame after feeling like an 'imposter' teaching about racism in a multicultural classroom. To us, these types of experiences, and our critical reflections upon them, sit at the foundations of good HE pedagogy. In exploring similar teaching and learning stories with our colleagues and students, we have found the antecedents of what we consider genuinely student-centred teaching, curriculum development, and support.

In the face of profound, unsettling, and in many cases rapid change to the conditions within which many of us now work, we argue that there is much that can be learned by considering and exploring the experiences of lecturers when they explicitly adopt such positions. Thus, it is in the contexts that academics find themselves, the pedagogies that they adopt within those contexts, and the reflections that they make on the process of doing so, that we can discover some powerful and progressive ways to plot a path through some of shifts and changes that face academia today. We consider this a profoundly important result of teaching with sociological imagination. Thus, our goal with this book is to bring together a series of essays addressing the interconnected and overlapping themes of context, pedagogy and reflection.

## Overview of Chapters

Each of the following chapters explores these themes with respect to a range of topical foci. Written as scholarly essays, each chapter explores a different aspect of teaching and learning in HE, providing practical examples of pedagogical strategies used to engage, enthuse or otherwise enhance students' experiences. Additionally, each concludes with some 'suggested discussion questions' which the author(s) provided to help inspire readers' reflection upon the issues raised in their chapter. We encourage readers to draw upon their own sociological imagination when considering these, so that the authors' ideas can contribute towards

creating new and exciting teaching and learning experiences in various different HE contexts.

Our first chapter discusses students' conceptualisations of social class. The authors, Professor Patrick Ainley and Dr Maria Papapolydorou, draw on the outcomes of a qualitative study of 120 final-year undergraduates from the UK. Views of class and classlessness are contrasted among students whose perspectives have been shaped around different class realities, with debate over class of origin and class of destination highlighting how a context shaped by a prevailing ideology of social mobility through education can be problematized in the HE classroom. The chapter builds towards the authors' advocacy of a 'logical approach to teaching about social class'.

Following on from this idea in terms of the importance of education equality, Dr James Arkwright writes about the meanings of inclusion as an education provider – both for individuals and institutions. As a lecturer who is also a wheelchair user, he draws on stories from his own experience to explore on whose terms we define inclusion and how outcomes towards goals of being an inclusive school or higher education institute are measured. Dr Arkwright draws on Foucauldian and Freirean concepts to make sense of the kinds of systemic actions that enable education to be experienced as equitable and supportive.

Professor David James draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu in the third chapter, suggesting how in the case of social science, teaching 'is something good and worthwhile'. Discussing the merits of a 'learning cultures approach', he argues that the 'best' teaching is dependent on the capacity and willingness of the teacher to help their students unpack 'what normally goes without saying' in terms of both the substance and the processes involved in educational practices. Stressing the value of empowering students and teachers alike to engage in 'creative subversion', James concludes that sociologically informed teaching can challenge the individualism enshrined within many educational orthodoxies.

Next, Mark Webb and Caroline Ukoumunne address the issue of problematizing race, racism(s) and post-colonial subjectivity within the UK HE context, outlining a method for putting critical race theory into practice in the classroom. Their chapter elucidates the authors' 'eye of discourse' practice model to explore opportunities to transform the complexity of counter-hegemonic theoretical knowledge into a practical pedagogical device. They argue how 'race' and 'racisms' can be re-examined in Higher Education by racialising our understanding of neoliberalism and academic methodology, in order to develop a liberatory pedagogy that embraces the sociological imagination.

In the fifth chapter, Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith writes about the often-unspoken value-orientation of knowledge in HE teaching, and the mechanisms of power and privilege of which we are all part. Set within the UK, but highly relevant to the global context in which we teach, she argues that we need to locate a particular responsibility not only to remain attuned in our own practice but also to take an active role in our institutional cultures.

Next, in moving to a virtual classroom environment, Dr Ursula Edgington co-authors a chapter with student-teacher Jade Wilton, drawing on the authors' two

individual perspectives as lecturer and student-teacher. They reflect on the experience of using Twitter to support teaching and learning within the context of New Zealand HE, and explain how a 'learning cultures approach' resonates with Māori philosophy while illuminating how the social media platform Twitter can be an empowering 'third space' to give voice to students and encourage connected, multicultural learning.

Dr Pam Lowe's chapter explores how students consider the connections between private troubles and public issues. Topics such as discrimination and inequality are a constant in most sociology curricula, and in many cases degree studies often cover emotionally challenging topics such as rape, abortion and death. She argues that whilst teaching and learning can be discomforting or distressing, this does not mean we should aim to eliminate negative emotions from students' learning. She offers some practical suggestions for coping with the constant balance between academic activities and the emotional aspects of teaching and learning on sensitive issues.

On a similar theme, Dr Laura L. Ellingson then discusses how the strategic use of laughter in the classroom can aid the processes of learning in HE. She argues that respectful, appropriate humour can uplift and engage students and teachers alike, whilst also highlighting how it is crucial to avoid hurtful, denigrating humour, which is likely to have the opposite effect. More specifically, Ellingson demonstrates how humour can be used to help students reflect on topics about which they may feel defensive, whilst also foster more open communication between students and their teachers.

In Chapter 9, Drs Alex Channon, Christopher R. Matthews and Anastasiya Khomutova present a case for incorporating physical movement into sociological teaching. Through the use of photos and reflective vignettes, they recount three practical lessons used to teach sociological theory and academic skills in novel, memorable ways. Developing the concept of the 'physical metaphor', the authors argue that students' capacity to learn through embodied experiences can add depth and vibrancy to classroom teaching, animating lessons on abstract concepts through the use of games, sports, dances, and other types of physical activity.

In the penultimate chapter, Professor Gayle Letherby argues that research, and the teaching related to this, like life, is itself political and that it is important to reflect on this significance in all the work that we do. She reflects on how her teaching, which is always informed by her research endeavours, has attempted to engage students in the exciting, messy world of research through a consideration of the feminist auto/biographical contention that feminist social research is in fact feminist theory in action.

Finally, Dr Christopher R. Matthews explores the doing of public sociology in the classroom. Based on a consideration of Burawoy's (2004) discussion of public sociology he suggests a re-orientation of teaching that centralises students' experiences by 'starting from where they are'. Matthews then illustrates several ways in which such an 'engaged' or 'active' pedagogy might be developed with students through a constructively aligned curricular approach, bridging content and assessment strategies with students' personal interests and potential careers objectives.

He considers this as a useful way in which sociology as a discipline can take advantage of shifts and changes in academia.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CPD | Continuing Professional Development |
| FE | Further Education (Post Compulsory or Tertiary education) |
| FEFC | Further Education Funding Council |
| HE | Higher Education (commonly university institutions, but can also take place in FE) |
| HEA | Higher Education Authority (UK) |
| HERDSA | Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia |
| IfL | Institute for Learning (UK) |
| INQAAHE | International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education |
| ITT | Initial Teacher-Training |
| KPIs | Key Performance Indicators |
| LSC | Learning & Skills Council (UK) |
| NCEA | New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement |
| NPM | New Public Management |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualification (UK) |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education (UK) |
| PFI | Public/Private Finance Initiative |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment (from the OECD) |
| PMS | Performance Management Systems |
| QA | Quality Assurance |
| SAR | Self-Assessment Report |
| SMT | Senior Management Team |
| (T)ESOL | (Certificate in Teaching) English for Speakers of Other Languages |
| UCET | Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UK) |
| UCU | Universities and Colleges Union |
| VLE | Virtual Learning Environment |

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# Notes on Contributors

**Prof Patrick Ainley** Professor of Training and Education at the University of Greenwich, UK. Patrick Ainley taught in secondary education before moving into Further Education. His role has been as a researcher, reader and professor in the School of Education at the University of Greenwich since 1995. Patrick is also Professor at the School of Education and Training (as was) and Visiting Fellow at New College, Oxford University. Patrick's books include: *The Betrayal of a Generation: How education is failing young people*, Policy Press 2016; *Learning Policy, Towards the Certified Society*, Macmillan 1999; *Apprenticeship: Towards a New Paradigm of Learning* (edited with Helen Rainbird) Kogan Page 1999.

**Dr James Arkwright** Head of Research, Bethlehem Tertiary Institution, New Zealand. James Arkwright works as a senior counsellor educator and has oversight for research at Bethlehem Tertiary Institute, Tauranga, New Zealand. He also actively engages in community work offering therapeutic retreats and professional development, and in being involved in the work of community agencies by serving on their boards of trustees. His doctoral thesis explored actions of agency and narrative storylines of people who have illness and/or disability. More recently, his research has explored an organisation's strengths and distinctive through using Appreciative Inquiry. His research interests include disability studies, inclusive education and community work, which he tends to explore through one or more of the following methodologies: narrative research, discourse analysis, constructivist grounded theory and appreciative inquiry.

**Dr Alex Channon** Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton, UK Alex Channon is currently Senior Lecturer in Physical Education and Sport Studies at the University of Brighton, UK. He teaches across the BA Physical Education, BA Physical Education with QTS, BA Sport Journalism and BA Sport Studies programmes, delivering material covering educational theory, policy, media studies, research methods and sociology. His research interests include the sociology of sport, physical education, violence and gender. His previous work has explored mixed-sex training and competition in martial arts and combat sports; the construction of gender and sexuality in sports media; and the contested meanings of 'violence' in

sociological research on sport. As well as publishing research papers across multiple peer-reviewed journals, he is the co-editor of *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors around the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Sex Integration in Sport and Physical Culture* (Routledge, 2017). Alex currently sits on the editorial board of *Sociology of Sport Journal* and the *Martial Arts Studies* book series (Rowman & Littlefield).

**Dr Ursula Edgington** Independent Scholar, New Zealand. Ursula Edgington had a fifteen-year career in various commercial-sector jobs in England before taking up an opportunity to pursue her passion to teach. She completed her PhD in Education in the UK and is a qualified and experienced post-compulsory teacher. Her teaching and research has always been connected to issues of social justice and situated within diverse educational settings including inner-city community projects, experiential learning projects for vulnerable young people and vocational subjects at tertiary institutions. She moved to New Zealand in 2013, where she was a part-time university lecturer for two years and is now a full-time independent scholar. In 2017 she was awarded Fellowship of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA). Her specialist areas are sociology of emotions, creative assessment strategies and enhancing student-centred learning. Her published academic work ranges from aspects of emotional labour in teaching and learning, to use of innovative research methodologies.

**Dr Laura L. Ellingson** Associate Professor, Santa Clara University, California, USA. Laura Ellingson's research focuses on gender in extended families, feminist and qualitative methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaboration and teamwork in health care organizations. She also publishes extensively in the field of qualitative methodology, on topics such as ethnography, embodiment, and envisioning a continuum approach to social science methodologies. Currently, she is collaborating with Photographer and Visual Artist Renee Billingslea, SCU Art & Art History Deptartment, and SCU alumna Kristian Borofka, on a project exploring communication in the lives of long-term cancer survivors, entitled 'Voicing Survivorship'. A website highlighting the 'photovoice' phase of the project shares participants' photos, their thoughts and stories and information on survivorship. Laura also is the author of *Communicating in the Clinic: Negotiating Frontstage and Backstage Teamwork* (Hampton 2005) and *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research* (Sage 2009), and co-author with Patty Sotirin of *Aunting: Cultural Practices that Sustain Family and Community Life* (Baylor University Press 2010) and *Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism, and Kinship in Popular Culture* (Baylor University Press 2013).

**Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith** Senior Lecturer, University of Sussex, UK. Tamsin Hinton-Smith is a senior lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Sussex. Before that she taught in a university sociology department for 13 years. As well as teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, she is a course leader for a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education – a qualification in university Teaching and Learning for academic staff from across disciplines.

She also carries out research on students' experiences of HE participation; to date this includes work on lone parents, teenage parents, Roma students, students from care leaving backgrounds and working-class students.

**Prof David James** Professor in the School of Social Sciences, University of Cardiff, UK. David James has been teaching in the social sciences since 1981. He is Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, and Director of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-commissioned Wales Doctoral Training Partnership. He is Chair of the Executive Editors of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, and an elected member of the Council of the *British Educational Research Association*. His research covers curriculum, learning and assessment in schools, further and higher education and the relationship between educational policy/practice and social inequality. He has been responsible for many research projects and evaluations, including co-directing two ESRC-funded projects. Books include *Bourdieu and Education* (1998, with Grenfell), *The Creative Professional* (1999, with Ashcroft), *Improving Learning Cultures in FE* (2007, with Biesta) and *White Middle Class Identities and Urban Schooling* (2011 & 2013, with Reay & Crozier).

**Dr Anastasiya Khomutova** Lecturer, University of Brighton, UK. Anastasiya Khomutova is a cross-cultural researcher in sport psychology, sociology and management. Her research and practice focus on adaptation and acculturation of immigrated athletes; the functioning of culturally diverse teams; and dissemination of cultural awareness in sport through educational workshops. Originally from Donetsk, Ukraine, she holds a PhD in Kinanthropology (specialising in Sport Psychology) and a master's degree in Psychology, both awarded by Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic. She is part of the managing council of ENYSSP (European Network of Young Specialists in Sport Psychology), and co-ordinates the Education Department of this organisation. She currently works as a lecturer in Sport Business and Strategic Management at the University of Brighton, UK.

**Prof Gayle Letherby** Director of the Institute of Health and Community, UK. Following 10 years as a Nursery Nurse, Gayle Letherby returned to (higher) education in the late 1980s to study Sociology. Between 1994 and 2015 she worked as a full-time academic, first at Coventry University, UK and then at Plymouth University, UK. Currently she is Honorary Professor of Sociology at Plymouth University and combines freelance academic activities with work as a Civil Celebrant http://www.arwenack.co.uk/p/home.html. Academic research and writing interests embrace all things methodological (including feminist, auto/biographical and creative approaches); reproductive and non/parental identities; gender, health and wellbeing; loss and bereavement; travel and transport mobility and working and learning in higher education.

**Dr Pam Lowe** Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Aston University, UK. Pam Lowe has a particular interest in teaching and learning sensitive issues within a critical pedagogical approach. Most of her teaching focuses on 'emotive' subjects such as

family lives and embodiment issues. Her main research interests are centred around women's reproductive health.

**Dr Christopher R. Matthews** Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University, UK. Christopher R. Matthews is a sociologist and fellow of the Higher Education Academy who has lead degree programmes for a number of years. He is an external examiner at Sheffield Hallam University and The University of Bedfordshire. His research has focused on gender theory, men's health, drug use, violence, combat sports and inequality in the workplace. He is currently conducting projects exploring concussion in sport, sports fan cultures, media representation of female athletes and developing an anti-violence community engagement project. He has published widely in a variety of peer-review journals and coedited the book; Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors around the World.

**Dr Maria Papapolydorou** Senior Lecturer, University of Nicosia, Cyprus. Maria Papapolydorou teaches on the Long Distance MA Education Sciences programme at the University of Nicosia in Cyprus and the Distance Education Unit of the European University of Cyprus. She is also a primary school teacher. Prior to that she worked as a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Greenwich and at Oxford Brookes University in the UK. Her research focuses on identities and inequalities (social class, ethnicity and gender) in the field of Education. She is also interested in social capital theory, particularly from a Bourdieusian point of view, and the way it can be used to explore teenagers' social networks. Her research outputs include an article published at the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, entitled 'When you see a normal person …': social class and friendship networks among teenage students. Her PhD thesis examined the relationship between social capital and students' education. More recently, her research explores the way social class is understood as a concept and as an identity by Higher Education students.

**Dr Caroline Ukoumunne** Director: Centre for Critical Race Theory in Practice and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education and Community Studies at the University of Greenwich, UK. Caroline is also a Black and Minority Ethnic expert voice selected by the BBC. Caroline Ukoumunne started her career in Higher Education in 1992 as a lecturer in English Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK where she taught in a range of courses including African Literature, African Drama, 19th and 20th European American Drama and Cultural Studies. In this role she developed one of the first African Literature courses in the UK and extended teaching in postcolonial theory.

Since joining the University of Greenwich, she has taught across a range of programmes including BA Hons Youth and Community Studies, BA Hons Education Studies and BA Hons Childhood and Youth Studies. Her main areas of teaching have focused on diversity and equality and she has jointly developed the first course in Critical Race Theory and Practice in the UK.

Her work in this department has included research in the area of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) degree attainment and was one of the coordinators on a

year-long project with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Equalities Challenge Unit to improving degree attainment. This work was the precursor to the current Race Equality Charter project that has been initiated by the Equalities Challenge Unit to address inequalities in Higher Education. Following on from this, her doctoral research has focused on African-Caribbean histories of education.

Her teaching interests include Critical Race Theory in Practice, Postcolonial Theory, Gender and Cultural Studies.

**Mark Webb** Director: Centre for Critical Race Theory in Practice and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education & Community Studies at the University of Greenwich, UK.

Mark Webb is a Senior Teaching Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). He comes from a multi-disciplinary background. He is a professionally qualified teacher, youth and community worker and has taught in the areas of education, youth and community, and social work. He has also been Director and Trustee of a national charity that offers services for Black and Ethnic Minority young people. He has coordinated various research projects, most recently a HEA funded project exploring how to improve Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) degree attainment in HE.

As a Critical Race Theorist (CRT) he is committed to interrogating theories of race and representation whilst making a challenge to discrimination in all its forms, integral to his role in education, training and research. He continues to develop challenging, innovative approaches to teaching and learning that have included creative use of virtual learning environments/avatars (representations and realities of identity politics)and more currently workshops using Stand-up comedy techniques (presentation skills) and a master class workshop for enhancing excellence in teacher training.

He joined Greenwich University in 2002 as a senior lecturer, formerly the programme leader for BA Hons Youth & Community Work and member of the university Education Development Unit. He now leads on the Critical Race Theory Practice undergraduate course and development of postgraduate courses. He has developed an innovative Creativity; Inclusivity and Pedagogy course incorporating a range of multimedia, e-learning technologies, creative writing and performance/theatre skills and combined for pedagogic intervention for educational practitioners.

**Jade Wilton** Jade graduated from her teacher-training at the University of Waikato, New Zealand in 2017. Jade has just graduated from a degree in teaching and has been teaching at a local primary school where she is also President of the Parent Teachers Association. She is an advocate for children learning through play, which is first developed by family in the home. Her research interests are in the connections between culturally sensitive teaching techniques and psychological learning theories.

# Chapter 1
# Class Talk: Discussing Social Class with English Undergraduates and Sixth-Formers

**Patrick Ainley and Maria Papapolydorou**

**Abstract** The research described here draws upon a qualitative study of 120 final-year undergraduates to understand the way these students perceived concepts of social class and to explore their understandings of the relationship between social class and education. In addition, sixth-form A-level Sociology students essayed A Logical Approach to Social Class. In conclusion, the chapter reflects on the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches adopted that aimed to engage students with sociological concepts of social class. In a context in which there has been a recent revival of interest in class and class analysis in England, along with suggestions that sclerotic class divisions in the country are at last changing or have changed, the student accounts retailed in this chapter offer insights into how younger people, growing up in this situation, understand standard academic and other social class schemes. Their conceptions of class and classlessness are contrasted with those of their mainly older teachers who, according to this account, may have grown up in a different class reality. This only adds to the inherent confusions between class of origin and class of destination that were also discussed with the students in the context of the prevailing ideology of social mobility through education. However, it is suggested that even the rejection of social class ascription by a minority of students can be seen as a form of class consciousness, particularly when this is conjoined to conspiracy theories. Misconceptions of individualism are also shown to be influenced by some students' religious beliefs, as well as to the sociological paradox of a society of individuals. However, most participants' place themselves in the middle – 'between the snobs and the yobs', as it has been said – whether they also see themselves as 'working class' or not, and this further indicates the influence of prevalent contemporary political discourse.

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## Introduction

The research described here illustrates what can be called ‘teaching as research’. It draws upon a qualitative study of two lecture groups of 120 final-year Education Studies undergraduates attending a core course at an English new university in 2012–2014. The study aimed to understand how these students perceived concepts of social class and to explore their notions of the relationship between social class and education. It is complemented by a further exercise which encouraged 16–18-year-old sixth-form students to adopt a logical consideration of social class categories while engaging in a participative approach to teaching about them that invites repetition as an exercise in ‘teaching as research’.

Of course, class is seen in different ways by different individuals and from a sociological point of view, this variety of perception is influenced by social background and experience. Given the backgrounds and experiences of the undergraduate students discussed here, their conceptions of social class were complex and multi-faceted – not to say confused. They comprised not only economic elements but also the cultural, social and symbolic. These ideas were often accompanied by ambiguity in relation to their own class identity. A minority of students even maintained they were classless and questioned the purpose of classifying individuals in class terms.

Given this variety of opinion, a second teaching exercise with a smaller group of London sixth-formers is briefly described to essay *A Logical Way of Teaching about Social Class*. These students at the end of their first year of A-level Sociology, though younger, were more familiar with the concepts involved and the aim of the lesson was to help them clarify their thinking on the subject of social class. Again, this activity could be developed further in ‘teaching as research’.

## Theoretical Background

As Silva argues, ‘There is a great deal of ambiguity and disagreement surrounding the concept of social class within sociology’ (2015, p. 175, n. 2). This has always been the case since the subject’s foundation (Roberts, 2012) but more recently class has re-engaged the attention of sociologists, especially Savage (2015). Following the global economic and political changes from the 1980s onward, some sociologists (Bauman, 1982; Giddens, 1990; Pakulski & Waters, 1996) proposed that social class-based identities in post-industrial/post-modern society had been replaced by individual identities based upon consumption-driven status hierarchies facilitated by the expansion of markets. Despite these changes others (Devine, 1992: Duckworth, 2013; Marshall et al., 1989; Reay et al., 2005) maintained that people still identify in class terms because social class remains a central feature of contemporary society. Between these two poles, other sociologists

suggested that social class identities are still present but that they have changed along with the classes themselves (Savage, 2007; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2001; Wright, 1979, 1982).

In particular, Savage et al. (2001) indicated that, even though most people are aware of the existence of class inequalities, they are defensive when asked about their own social background and instead prefer to portray themselves as 'ordinary'. People highlight their class 'ordinariness' by putting forward perceptions of being 'in the middle, and hence, normal' (Savage et al., 2001, p. 887). Especially, 'The need to work is used to establish a certain common position' (Savage et al., p. 888). This fits with traditional sociological approaches that understood class primarily in occupational terms (Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992). However, recent sociological approaches were influenced by feminist acknowledgement of the difficulties of placing women in a changed labour market within traditional class schemes. They therefore included cultural and social as well as economic elements in their conceptions of class and their appreciation of individual class identities (Crompton, 1998; Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 2004). These approaches, as Bottero argues, 'abandon the notion of distinct or cohesive class identities or groups, focusing instead on individualized hierarchical differentiation' (2004, p. 987). This allows class identities to be acknowledged within a context where collective class identities are weak (Savage, 2000). This 'multidimensional approach to class' (Savage, 2015, p. 401) is now the new orthodoxy, especially in education-related social study (but for a critique see Mills, 2014).

Certainly, perceptions of social class are strongly associated with issues of culture and ethnicity. Research suggests that people's ethnic background can shape their understandings of social class as well as the way they position themselves and/or are positioned by others in the social class hierarchy. For instance, Rollock et al. (2011) found that Black middle-class adults in England often make sense of their middle-class identity in a different way than White middle-class adults. Papapolydorou's research (2013a) with teenage school students in London showed that how they identified others in social class terms was often infused with cultural and ethnic stereotypes. Furthermore, people's class background might differentially inform their own ethnic identity; Moore's 2008 ethnographic study in the USA indicating that middle-classness contributes to particular understandings of ethnic identity among Black people there. Similarly Raj's research with South Asian immigrants in England showed her participants' 'specific sense of class identity as successful immigrants has entirely shaped their ethnic identification' (2003, p. 36).

Also relevant to the discussion of class understandings and identities is the debate on the changing nature of the social class structure. If society's class structure and relevant patterns of social mobility have been transformed in line with corresponding economic and political changes, then class understandings and identities may have altered accordingly. For instance, Savage et al.'s 2013 research, based on a large BBC survey, advanced a seven class model with an 'elite' at one end and a 'precariat' at the other. For their part, Ainley and Allen argued that, along with widely accepted class polarisation (a growing gap between

top and bottom), there has been a recomposition of the traditionally conventional three class structure, so that:

> Rather than the post-war 'pyramid' model of the occupational structure… the class structure has gone pear-shaped. It has become increasingly polarised with a "working middle" competing more fiercely for a contracting number of professional/managerial jobs at the top and growing numbers falling to the bottom. (2010, p. 76)

As a result, 'the limited upward social mobility of the last century has given way to general downward social mobility in this one' (Ainley, 2016). Standing, on the other hand, argues that 'globalisation has resulted in a fragmentation of national class structures' (2011, p. 7) so that, alongside existing classes, growing numbers of people internationally find themselves in a new class that he calls 'the precariat'. Standing's precariat is much larger and politically more explosive than Marx and Engel's lumpenproleriat, that 'passively rotting social scum' as they described it (1848). It is also 'dangerous' because this new, growing and mainly youthful class is open to demagogic manipulation. So Standing's 2014 *Precariat Charter* seeks to change them *From denizens to citizens*. Somewhat similarly, Jones alleged that a deliberate political strategy of successive Conservative/Coalition and New Labour governments was to 'chavify' the entire working class by recasting it as an 'underclass' 'whose poverty was supposedly self-inflicted' (2012, p. 67). Supported by the dominant media (Skeggs, 1997), this contrasts 'hard working people' with (by implication) the not hard working and unrespectable poor. However, contrary to popular impressions, very few of this so-called 'underclass' are the same people plunged permanently into a 'culture of poverty'. Rather, as Shildrick et al. (2010) confirmed in Glasgow and Teeside, most churn through part-time, insecure and low-paid jobs intermitted by spells of unemployment.

Teaching final year undergraduate students afforded a captive audience to investigate these changing concepts of social class and class identification, as well as an opportunity to introduce them to current debates and for them to discover their own class identities. The interest here is not only in the nature of class identities but also in the way class is understood as a general concept, not necessarily related to the self. Are students' class understandings and/or identities in line with traditional theorisations of class based on occupation or are they more aligned to understandings of class which take into consideration broader social and cultural formations as proposed by Savage's new orthodoxy referred to above? Higher education students are very relevant to such discussion because they might be seen as – and might see themselves as – situated in a 'transitional' if not 'contradictory' class location (Wright, 1982). Also, the close association of educational credentials with upward social mobility is typically reflected in the aspirations and expectations of many university students for particular kinds of employment upon graduation (Tomlinson, 2008; Warmington, 2003). Yet, the current political and economic situation renders the actual prospects for such employment uncertain (Ainley & Allen, 2010). Therefore, the exploration of HE students' social class understandings and identities could also illuminate debates about (upward) social mobility and meritocracy, which were the ostensible subject of the undergraduate lectures.

## Methodology

To address this, two groups of undergraduates in successive third years were asked to express their opinions about social class by posting to a forum on a Virtual Learning Environment before lectures on the subject. These posts were visible to all students enrolled on the course and to members of staff teaching it, although they did not participate beyond giving prompts for discussion. This ‘student-led’ exercise may have been a case of what Graff calls ‘the blind leading the blind’ (2003, p. 179) but at least the exercise served as an initial opportunity for students to express and exchange ideas. Following two lectures on social class and social mobility, students posted their reflections on the ideas introduced in the lectures on a second Forum. Students were prompted to consider (a) the way the themes discussed in the two sessions were relevant to them, not just as students but as (young) people, parents, practitioners, etc., and (b) whether the lectures and the seminar discussions had modified or reinforced their original views about questions of meritocracy, social class, social mobility, etc. Students responded well to this invitation and approximately three quarters of both year cohorts participated in at least one of the two Forums. It is students’ views and understandings of social class, as discussed in these two Forums, that we draw upon here. Taking the two years together (since these did not differ substantially), we report the way these students understood social class and the way they identified in class terms.

Students were informed, both orally and in writing, about the intention to use their Forum posts for research purposes, including for dissemination activities such as this chapter. They gave their consent on condition: pseudonyms would be used instead of their real names. A thematic content analysis (Flick, 1998) was applied to the posts on the Forums. Thematic codes were developed both in advance of and during the data analysis, to better organise and make sense of it. An initial coding scheme related to existing research or theory (Mayring, 2000) on social class identities was applied. These codes were then revisited and redefined, leading to the development of new codes in relation to which the data was analysed.

From course returns, the two years’ sample comprised a mixture of younger students, aged 21–22 (33%), with 33% 23–30 and 34% 30 or over. Nearly all came from a semi-suburban area of South East London and 86% were women. 55% of the programme students self-identified as ‘White’, 18% were ‘Asian/Asian British’ (8% ‘Bangladeshi’, 3% ‘Indian’, 4% ‘Pakistani’, 3% ‘other Asian’ background). 18% were ‘Black/Black British’ (8% ‘Black African’, 9% ‘Black Caribbean’, 1% ‘other Black’ background). 6% were from a mixed background and 3% were from ‘other ethnic background’. The ethnic categories follow those used by the University, however, as participants were not asked to identify themselves in their posts other than by a name, their ethnic group is not specified in the posts below. Nevertheless, occasionally students made implicit and/or explicit references to their ethnic background enabling some reflection on issues related to ethnicity.

As students on an HE Education Studies programme, our participants had encountered notions of social class before, so they were not entirely unfamiliar with theoretical considerations of the concept. We could therefore expect that, like other social science students, they were more conversant with concepts of social class than other university students. Their initial responses to Forum A gave some indications of this and a comparison with Forum B might reveal not only their starting assumptions but whether these had changed to incorporate into their thinking concepts to which they had been introduced, such as class against status, origin as opposed to destination, agency *versus* structure, mobility and meritocracy, as well as the contested class schemes outlined above.

## Findings

### *Defining Social Class and Social Class Identity*

The starting point for many students in the first Forum was that the definition of social class tied in with notions of occupation, income and wealth, or the lack of them. As Alice stated, 'money, wealth and privileges define the nature of social class'. Sally added that social class has been 'historically linked to occupation'. Other students understood the concept of social class, or even defined their own social class background, in relation to their occupation and/or the occupation of their parents. For instance, Kate and Helen:

> I have my own personal view of class, and have internalised what class I am, which I believe is down to my parents and their work. Therefore I believe I am working class, as my dad had a manual job.

> I have always considered my family to be working class as they work full time at under-qualified jobs and money is tight.

This understanding of their social class background is in line with sociological frameworks, which operationalise social class using occupation-based classifications (Office for National Statistics, 2000a, 2000b; Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992).

Yet, for most students – as Janet ventured – 'It's got to be more than wealth, income and occupation'. Indeed, there was widespread acknowledgement that social class requires a wider, more pluralistic definition, which does not only encompass economic elements but also cultural, social, symbolic, etc. In this view, as Rita maintained, 'class can be determined by economic capital, social capital and cultural capital'. Similarly, Sally and Shauna:

The contemporary view of social class is multi-faceted – it is about educational achievements, employment, background, lifestyles and beliefs.

> I think social class is defined by a set of shared values, lifestyle and interests.

These culturalist understandings are consistent with the work of sociologists, like Savage, who draw from Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986), to suggest a wider

understanding of social class that is not confined to economic elements. Other students added that ‘Social class is based on upbringing’ (Derek), while in Christopher’s view ‘Social class is a product of your upbringing, education and profession’. Several posts echoed research evidence that underpins the classed nature of parenting (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 1989, 2008; Reay, 2005).

## The Complexity of Social Class

Most students saw social class as multi-faceted with no single definitional quality. In Alex’s view:

Social class is a very complex issue, with many aspects surrounding it; it is defined in so many ways, by so many different people. […] There is not and cannot be a simple answer, as everyone’s views and opinions are different; society is so versed [*sic*] and varied that it is no longer just a matter of land ownership and having a job!

This acknowledgement was often accompanied by confusion. Several professed that they were uncertain of what exactly constitutes social class, For example:

> I truly believe that categorizing class is very complicated, as everyone has a different opinion on this. Some may say class depends on income however some do say it depends on their way of thinking and attitudes, way of living life, etc. So which is correct? I think it would be very difficult to define class. (Aisha)

Students’ belief that class is a confusing and therefore possibly not very useful social category extended to the way they understood their own social class positioning as ambiguous. Confusion was even exaggerated by the different definitions of social class present in academic literature and/or by the different theoretical frameworks advanced to comprehend social class structures and inequalities. Laura, for instance:

> Some might say I am working class as I work, I grew up in a council house and do not come from a wealthy background. However, I am a home owner. Does this mean I am middle class? I take my children to museums and am a member of English Heritage so have a degree of ‘cultural capital’ […] Is there a lower class for those who are not ‘working’? Is there a category for those with cultural capital minus the wealth or family history, or are the social class boundaries blurred? Is it possible to be 50:50?

Laura perceives her economic capital as inconsistent with her cultural capital so that she feels more comfortable in an ‘in-between’ (shared working-class and middle-class) category. This might place her in Class 6 of Savage’s 7 classes as an ‘Emergent service worker’, which is a ‘marginal class in terms of its economic capital, but its social and cultural capital is high’ (Savage et al., 2013, p. 240). Or, like other students who regard themselves as socially mobile, Laura sees herself as belonging in two different class categories – one of origin that she was born into or ascribed and one of destination that she had achieved. Another interpretation of this might be that the categories have shifted around the individuals concerned so

that, whether originally middle or working class, they are now part of what Ainley and Allen called a 'new middle-working/working-middle class' (2010, p. 126).

Students' ambiguity regarding their social class background was intensified in relation to (upward) social mobility. Some students, who originally self-ascribed as working class, were uncertain as to whether acquisition of a university degree and/or of a 'middle-class job' would render them middle class.

> Am I now middle class because I go to university even though I come from a working-class family? Or will I always be working class because of this? (Lauren)

> I agree how complex class is and have a problem myself of not knowing what class I am. Do I call myself middle class now I'm doing a degree and will hopefully end up a teacher? Not so sure I want to be middle class darling! Or is that my own 'being judgemental' coming out! (Harriet)

Educational credentials and the prospect of upward social mobility were generally aspired to. Especially, the acquisition of 'a middle-class job', such as a teacher, was a key expectation of students' post-degree lives. Yet, as shown in Lauren's and Harriet's extracts, the actual change of their social class background was much more doubtful and in Harriet's case it was resented. This shows how identification with class of origin can be deeply rooted in individuals despite change in class of destination. It could also reflect uncertainties about whether the aspiration to upward social mobility to a new class of destination would be fulfilled, or – possibly – whether this transition would indeed be a real one if 'going to university' to 'end up a teacher' merely placed the student in an occupational group that actually increasingly shared the subordinated conditions of waged labour. A situation Ainley and Allen liken to 'running up a down escalator – where you have to gain more and more qualifications simply to stand still' (2010, p. 73).

Related to this, an exchange between participants in the second Forum discussed whether a working-class individual could feel middle or upper class if they won the lottery, that is as a result of increased income only. Below are extracts from three students who engaged in this discussion:

> I find class a very thought provoking subject, as people view the classes using different criteria. If I won the lottery, would that catapult me to upper class? (Sarah)

> I definitely don't think winning the lottery would elevate anyone's class status Sarah, as I don't really see wealth as a measure of social class. I imagine the dot com millionaires created in the boom of the 90s still consider themselves the same class as they were before – likewise the aristocracy that have fallen on hard times. (Jane)

> I chose NOT to take well-paid jobs with long hours, and now I have fallen into the underclass poverty trap… but I am still working class and always will be... even if I won the lottery tonight! (Liz)

Aside from Jane's characteristic elision of class and status (the respect or esteem given to different class positions), this conversation suggests that social class identity extends well beyond what constitutes an occupational definition. This, therefore, creates a disparity between actual and perceived social class (objective *versus* subjective social class – see below). This disparity allows for

individuals, whose sociological profile, in terms of occupation, income, status, etc., positioned them in one social class group to perceive themselves as belonging to another one. A small number of students, like Liz and Jane, appeared to fall into this category as they suggested that their own class identity would not change even if their social class conditions did. This kind of inelasticity, with reference to social class identities, suggests (a) the strength with which working-class identities are experienced by some individuals, and (b) the feelings of pride involved in being working- (or sometimes middle-) class so that the social-class identity of some socially mobile individuals is more informed by their class of origin than by their class of destination. This might be particularly the case if this original identity was historically fixed and unambiguous, as compared with the contemporary social situation which is more fluid and therefore situations are unclear.

Yet, even the majority of self-ascribed working-class students were eager to be identified as middle class. For example,

> I was born into a working-class family [but] I feel that when completing the degree and eventually gaining a teaching career my class will stay the same without mobility, as teaching wages are not massive, although I'd like to think I'd be classed as middle class. (Kerry)

For students like Kerry – unlike Liz and Jane – class identity was in keeping with social class destination rather than with social class origin. This confirms that social-class identities are constructed differentially by different people: class identities can be seen as either fixed and static or as flexible and changing. For those who adhere to the latter view, social mobility would imply a change in class identity whereas for those who adhere to the former it would not. Indeed, the majority of the students appeared to adopt a flexible understanding of social class that would allow for change in class identity to occur.

## The Relative and Subjective Nature of Social Class Identity

By subjective social class we refer to people's perception of their own position in the social class hierarchy. In other words, subjective social class is the category people choose when asked to define themselves in class terms however understood, as in Forum A. By objective social class we refer to the individual's position in the social class hierarchy as defined by tangible measures, such as education, income, occupation that were covered in the intervening lectures before students participated in Forum B. Possible changes in social class position were not only discussed with respect to personal experiences (or anticipations) of social mobility, namely in terms of individual class changes occurring over time in a fixed class structure, but also with respect to changes in the class structure historically and in other societies. In this discussion, most participants sustained the view that social class was a relative as opposed to an absolute concept.

Several examples were given of the changing and relational nature of social class, sometimes with macro-level examples, such as comparing different countries, and sometimes to micro-level ones, related to particular individual experiences.

> The idea of social class is something that is constantly changing and is different from person to person and nation to nation. In some countries social class is defined by how dark or how light you are; in others it is defined by what school or university you go to. (Charmaine)

> My perception on class comes from a cultural perspective, (I am originally from Ghana) where a person's class is dominantly placed on knowledge and education. In Ghana the amount of money one has is a reflection of how they have been educated. However my experience has shown me that middle-classness in the UK is more complex, spanning from financial status to leisure choices (e.g. Cinema *vs*. Theatre). (Adjoa)

Such country differences were particularly emphasised by students who, as they appeared in their posts, were immigrants and/or were familiar with another country. Differences in the social class structure were then often referred to in conjunction with the culture, politics and history of the country but also in relation to the educational opportunities available there. For example,

> Where I come from, there are villages without schools, schools without teachers, teachers without the proper training, knowledge and understanding and parents without education, and without mercy I must say, as they seem to think it is wrong to educate girls. […] Personally, I do not sense much action in terms of social mobility in the case of the child from the village. (Bahar)

Such contexts were often contrasted with the UK, where upward social mobility was seen as much more achievable.

Another common theme, especially in Forum B, was historical change to the English class structure, a consideration introduced in the lectures. As with the extracts above, these changes were often discussed in relation to education, and it was a unanimously strong belief that social classes have changed as a result of more educational opportunities being available today.

> I think the nature of social class has changed dramatically over time, and was much more relevant in the Victorian era. Support for lower income individuals/families has dramatically improved, especially financially, but also with support in gaining qualifications to better their CV and therefore their income and opportunities. (Amanda)

> In times gone by a university education was considered to be for the wealthy and educational elite… Uni is now considered a rite of passage for many young people – this in itself will change class classifications (if they still exist). (Janet)

These comments were typical of many students who did not critically engage in debates around social class inequalities in education, despite prompts in the lectures and seminars. Instead, like the students of Jenkins and her colleagues (2011), students like Amanda and Janet maintained that educational opportunities were widespread and universal in the UK and that people could exercise choice to determine the course of their lives. Of course, this could be said to reflect and

justify the financial and personal investment that many students were making in their studies.

Students' understandings of social class as relative to a changing context were also evident in the way they compared themselves to others.

> I have never really considered myself to be of any class, but on reflection during my time working in the City for various Chief Executives I did feel of a lower class to them. They not only earned high wages but also had a different 'air' about them. (Rita)

> When I became part of a different family, who I would say are middle class, I am now confused. The difference to me is having great household appliances (to my mother's distress when I go home and moan that the fridge is too small, etc.), dinner parties and going shopping without having to worry (quite as much). (Helen)

Negotiations of social class are often interwoven with power relations (Papapolydorou, 2013b), and the 'class-making' (Bourdieu, 1987) process might, on some occasions, contribute to the intensification of the extent to which such power relations are played out. As one student argued:

> People like to know whereabouts they stand and like to be better than others and where possible even sh*t on the people below them to get to where they are at. (Jessie)

This relational understanding of social class, namely that one's position is defined with reference to others' social class positions, extended to what were perceived as new, emerging class groups, for example

> The emergence of the 'underclass' (those dependent on the state) is probably a result of the upward social mobility of some of the working class. (Chantelle)

> We are now in a situation where people who don't work, and receive money from the government are known as the "underclass." Does this make working class the new middle class? (Alex)

The idea of a middle class only makes sense if there is a class below and a class above. In the absence of a traditional industrial working class, a new middle-working/working-middle class could be posited against an 'underclass' below and an implicitly present upper class, which, if not explicitly mentioned, is alluded to as an 'aristocracy' or 'elite' (as by Savage, 2015), though not as a 'ruling class' (as by Roberts, 2001). This left respondents 'between the snobs and the yobs', as has been said. 'In the middle' is also an attractively neutral and non-committal self-ascription, like 'normal' or 'ordinary', as Savage noted (2001). All these understandings of class in relational terms suggest that most students were well aware of the existence of class hierarchies but confused as to where they might belong.

## Class(lessness) and a Conspiratorial View of Class Categorisation

However, around 20% of respondents across all age groups in both Forums rejected class as an identity and as a sociological category. Phrases such as 'the

desire alone is what makes you' and 'why does a person's class have to be such an issue?' were expressed by students in this group, some of whom maintained that social classes do not exist and/or that, even if they do, they themselves are classless and somehow stand outside the system. In the terms of the debate on class they were introduced to, they emphasized 'agency' over 'structure'.

> Money, materials and class mean nothing, you are who you make yourself and I'm Shashi Kumar, it's as simple as that! (Shashi)

> I personally would probably be seen by society as working class, as both my parents worked in service industries and I grew up in a council house. I feel that I am classless, as it is something that I do not see as important. I value people who work hard and try to do the best for themselves and their loved ones. (Michelle)

This rejection of social class identity and assertion of individual agency was often complemented by comments on the dangers of social classifications/categorisations with social class schemas perceived as 'a way of putting people in their place'. In the same vein, Abigail saw educational policy supporting under-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds with extra funding, as harmful:

> The application of the pupil premium (DfE, 2012) at an amount of £450 a head in order to ensure equal levels of attainment simply serves to enforce this divide and ensures a continuation of different classes in our society.

Students, like Abigail, differentiated themselves from any class category or 'label', as they often called it. They considered class classifications as stereotyping and limiting for individuals. For instance, many of them perceived the policy of Free School Meals as unnecessary and stigmatising. As Abigail mentioned elsewhere,

> Labelling of social class is still taking place throughout our society. The fact that the only way the government can differentiate socio-economic status in schools is by measuring the amount of free school meals students puts a label on the students from the start of their lives.

The existence of social class inequalities (educational or otherwise) were thus conflated with social classifications and/or policies that were based on some kind of categorisation, such as the Pupil Premium and Free School Meals, and that were not universal but applied only to particular social groups. Similarly, support for single mothers was also mentioned as stigmatising through 'becoming a statistic'. As Katie, who identified as 'a single mum', stated, I am not the sum of a class imposed upon me!

A less frequent rejection of class was constructed within religious (or even humanist and democratic) frameworks of equality:

> I think that social class is, and will always be, a socially constructed concept that has been created as a way of putting people in their place […] How can one living, breathing human being be considered a lesser person than another? In God's eyes, we are all equal. (John)

> I personally do not believe in social class as everyone has a different lifestyle, and some may have more money than others, it does not really make a difference, I think it's about being a good civil human being? To Allah everyone is equal! (Rubana)

This religious commitment to the equality of all souls was in accord with the egalitarian ethos of the particular HE institution the students attended but also of education generally in which all students are treated equally in their efforts to become other than what they are, and any educational (dis/)advantages that students bring with them as a result of their social background are ignored. On the other hand, if they fail ‘to make something of themselves’, ‘they only have themselves to blame’, as teachers repeatedly tell them.

Class and other categorisations could then be seen as some kind of conspiracy causing or sustaining the divisions and inequalities they described. Consequently, operationalising and/or researching social class was felt to be oppressive, even amounting to reluctance to discuss social class, let alone consider the ‘them’ who might be imposing these divisive categories upon others. Despite this, we suggest that this minority view also expressed an indirect form of class awareness, if not consciousness. This awareness can be linked to the defensive attitude of many students towards class, which might stem from an unacknowledged recognition of the detrimental effects of class inequalities upon individuals and their agency. Particularly in relation to education which, in a supposedly classless society, becomes a way of talking about the realities of class that are conventionally denied.

## Summary

Despite adherence by a minority to a notion of unclassifiable individuality, a large majority of these on-line student responses strongly acknowledged the persistence of social class divisions in society and engaged reflectively with the definition of social class. However, there were a variety of perceptions of social class and types of class identity. Many contributors, in line with traditional sociological approaches outlined in the introduction, operationalised class in terms of occupation if not of power, while others conceived of class instead, or also, in terms of cultural and social differences.

With regards to students’ self-ascribed class identities, there was again a significant variety in the responses. Many, as we have seen, aspired to join a new or expanded ‘middle’ and, moreover, defined their class position in relation to (higher) education. On the other hand, a smaller group maintained that their ‘working-class’ identity would be sustained, regardless of educational qualifications or professional destinations. Other students were less sure of what class encompassed and of their own class identity. They found class complex and difficult to define. As a consequence, conceiving of themselves in class terms was problematic. Some believed that they did not adequately fit existing class schemes and/or that they sat within new in-between or shared categories.

Finally, even the rejection of class, by a small group of students, in favour of individuality, followed a distinctive sociological paradigm that coincides with postmodern analyses of class associated with the prevalence of individual

consumption and lifestyle identities. These responses are, therefore, compatible with broader sociological frameworks, which might then suggest that student apprehensions are typical of wider social class understandings, so that – even in denying social class – they are a form of social class awareness if not consciousness. If, in addition, social class structures are in a process of reconstruction, as Ainley and Allen (2010) and also Standing (2011) suggest, confusion is to be expected as social actors think in terms of first one and then the other class schema, or muddle them together. This adds to the usual confusion over class origins and destinations.

## A Logical Approach to Teaching about Social Class

Given the characteristic confusion that we have shown prevails, *A Logical Approach to Teaching about Social Class* (Ainley & Papapolydorou, 2014) might be adopted, which we essayed with smaller groups of sixth-form students and have written up more fully as an exemplary lesson in the British Journal of Sociology's *Sociology Teacher*. Similarly to Forum A above, this invited smaller A-level classes of students to initially seat themselves around tables according to their opinion as to the number of social classes (not necessarily which class they thought that they were in). If they thought class did not exist, then there were no classes or just one class of 63 million individuals (as listed in the last UK census in 2011). The next logical possibility was two classes – 'those who work for their money and those whose money works for them', as one participant pithily put it. Then a three-class model – either the traditional 'upper:middle:lower' pyramid or a new upper:working-middle/middle-working:'under' one). Next, a four-class combination of these in upper:middle:working:'under'. There were never many takers for five but six was a popular option in line with advertisers' and psephologists' common division into A, B, C1, C2, D and E. Students were also informed of Savage's new seven class scheme but there were never any takers for it either. So six seemed the highest number that these students could comfortably work with, unless they went in for endless refinements of 'upper-' and 'lower-middle', 'respectable' and 'rough' working class, etc! Still, it should be noted that the 2000 Standard Occupational Classification emends the Registrar General's 1911 scheme from eight to nine categories but these are arguably estimations of status or the relative social standing of the occupations that are grouped together.

Key concepts (underlined in our teaching notes for the students and in the *Sociology Teacher* article) began by explaining that believing in individuality does not necessarily negate class (as in Mao Tsetung's 1927 comparison of peasants to leaves on a tree, no two of which are identical but which are still all leaves), progressed to the difference between class and caste, leading on in turn to social mobility (up and/or down, relative or absolute), origins and destinations, intersectionality with age, gender and ethnicity (one student in one session interjecting at

this point that 'This whole class thing is just for white people!'), possible new classes, such as the precariat, class consciousness in- and for-itself, etc. Other inevitable side-tracks included whether there is still an aristocracy and other defunct classes – in England at least – such as a peasantry. Also, the statistical unlikelihood of 'marrying money' since most people find partners within their own class (however narrowly defined), if not (again) winning the lottery. At the end of the sessions in which all this and more had been discussed, students were invited to regroup themselves if they had changed their opinions from their initial starting points and to provide justifications for their position, perhaps as homework!

The conclusion to the exercise was that 'as sociologists we have to choose the class scheme we think best describes and explains the social phenomena we observe' (Ainley & Papapolydorou, 2014). This somewhat anodyne conclusion could be criticised for leaving out power dynamics, as well as for being 'eclectic rather than dialectic' (as Colin Waugh, the editor of *Post-16 Educator* in which the exercise was also reported, said in a personal communication). To meet such objections, the exercise could be further extended systematically by choosing socially contrasted schools in which to conduct the lesson – private, academy and local authority, a possibility to which we are open to invitation! Such exercises would still only reveal how small groups of young people from differing social backgrounds think about social class and offer no direct evidence as to the existence and number of social classes in the UK today, about which debate will surely continue.

As introductions to the debates, the approaches above at least afford more direct entry than the common approach – at least in introductory Sociology courses – of encouraging autobiographical reflections. Such narratives tend to follow autobiographical convention, like *David Copperfield* writing as 'the hero of my own life', or what Bourdieu, quoted in the publisher's note to his posthumous *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, called 'the biographical illusion' (2009, p. 2). These self-dramatizing narratives of often painful 'journeys' tend towards eventual affirmations of new-found identities, for example in what West (1996) called 'the conventional adult learner biography'. Silva (2015) notes that many of her young working-class Americans subscribe to what she calls a 'therapeutic narrative' of maturity through self-mastery only going to prove that 'what does not crush us makes us stronger' (Nietzsche, 1889). This is similar to 'the therapy industry' that Frank Furedi and his followers have repeatedly denounced as 'infantilizing' English undergraduates by coddling the mass of students instead of subjecting them to a rigorous academicism (Williams, 2016). For Silva, at one pole 'the therapeutic language of individual needs' resolves 'anxiety [that] is rooted only in the need to create the best possible life out of a vast array of options' (2015, p. 8), whilst at another it dovetails with the new administrative language of 'the student journey' that is increasingly celebrated and regulated at English universities. Ainley (2011) concluded this 'tends to trap students within what Giddens called "the reflexive project of the self"' and thus reduces sociological to psychological understanding.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. If you agree that social class exists, how many classes do you think there are and which one do you think you belong to? Create a mind map to visually represent your ideas.
2. Education is often presented as a means to (upward) social mobility. Do you agree with some of the students above that it can do this? (In all or only some cases?) What other means are there to change from your class of origin to a different class of destination?
3. Pierre Bourdieu distinguished between economic (money) capital and cultural capital. This last was shown in the Great British Class Survey by what newspapers respondents read, the television programmes they watched and whether they went to the theatre, etc. – and some of the students above give different examples (visiting English Heritage places, etc.). But does cultural capital really make the difference Savage thinks it does to your money capital and so what class you are according to traditional measures of occupation/income? For example if someone comes from another culture – does this affect their social class?
4. Among other things, the students reported above discuss how class has changed historically. Can you think of other examples of this sort of change where some classes die out over time and new ones appear? Do you think these sorts of changes are still going on in this and other societies?
5. Class in England is a bit of a contentious subject (like talking about how much money you have, or openly discussing sex or religion) but people often refer to it indirectly and use indicators of social class, like accent and clothes, to talk instead about whether someone is 'posh' or 'a bit common', etc. Can you think of examples of when you, your friends or relatives might have done this? Does this make them 'snobs'? Does this happen more with men or women, or older people? Write down your thoughts and experiences.

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# Chapter 2
# Inclusion in Education: 'A Piggy Back Will Do?'

**James Arkwright**

**Abstract** 'Inclusion' within education is not a new word. Typically, as educators, we want education to work for all our students and we are required to provide equality within education. Consequently, it is not unusual to hear statements like 'we are an inclusive school'. However, what exactly does it mean to be an inclusive education provider, on whose terms do we define inclusion, and how do we measure outcomes relative to the goal of being an inclusive school or higher education institute? In this chapter, I reflect on a number of different stories that depict teaching practices and institutional polices that have distanced students from feeling included, as well as those practices and policies which invite students to engage with and enjoy their learning environment. The selected stories are drawn from a number of case studies, namely: children's and adults' experiences of education as a student who has an illness and/or disability, work experiences within the education sector when a person has an illness and/or disability, and a tertiary institution's policy on student attendance. The meta-narrative that emerges from these local stories is that the idea of inclusion is easier to voice and write than actually achieve in practice. An analysis of the competing discursive realities that vie for ascendency within the case studies illustrate why inclusion within education is challenging to action well; despite inclusion education policies being prevalent and/or educators' intentions towards inclusion being positive. Foucauldian and Freirean concepts have been drawn on in making sense of both the discursive complexity of providing inclusive education and the kinds of systemic actions that enable education to be experienced as equitable and supportive.

## Introduction

Inclusive education, as a concept, has often been used in quite a diverse range of ways, sometimes more targeted to those with identified learning needs aka 'special

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education' (Ballard, 1996, 2013; Rutherford, 2009) and other times understood more broadly, referring to the aim of eliminating social exclusion within education as 'a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, gender and ability' (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998, as cited in Ainscow, 2005, p. 109). It is with the spirit of the latter description that this chapter resonates more closely to, even though all but one of the examples discussed are specific to people's experiences within the education sector when they have an illness and/or disability. In endeavouring to understand and address social exclusion within education, six case studies are examined in terms of policies and practices that have distanced students and/or staff from feeling included, as well as those practices and policies which invite students and staff to engage with and enjoy their learning and/or working environment.

The case studies themselves have been sourced from several different projects (Arkwright, 2005, 2011, 2014) but have been collated together within this discussion because of the recognition which emerges from a discursive analysis of them. Namely, that what often is at stake in practicing inclusion well within education is the operation of negotiating between the separate discursive realities of: educators' expectations, education and institutional policies, competing cultural imperatives, and the respective capacities of students and/or staff who are being positioned in non-inclusive terms. It is suggested that a helpful negotiation of such potentially competing discursive priorities is assisted by an understanding of the power relation that occurs when competing discourses vie for ascendancy. That is, when subject positions of inclusion appear less important than other discursive subject positions, such as those that embody the ideals of normality, body aesthetics, health, rationality, self-discipline, individual autonomy, competition, perfection, certainty, technological advancement, efficiency, competency and achievement.

## The Discursive Minnow of Inclusion in Education

In making sense of how subject positions of inclusion are sometimes inaccessible or not consistently available for students and/or staff within education, it can be helpful to view inclusion within education as something of a 'David' up against the twin 'Goliaths' of medical discourse and free market consumerism's influence within education. Since Foucault's critique of modern medicine in *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), in which he identified how as a society we had become 'regulated… in accordance with normality' (p. 35) and health had evolved into 'the duty of each and the objective of all' (Foucault, 1980, p. 170), we have become aware of how illness and disability are subject positions of deficit. In reaction to this positioning which alienates people with impairment, disability studies and inclusive education have become the academic sites of resistance, re-storying disability as related to societal oppression and not biological dysfunction (Oliver, 1990), and arguing that all children and young people have the right to an education where they 'are welcome, belong… and can participate in all aspects of school life' (The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, n.p.).

The success of disability studies and inclusive education to meaningfully influence government actions is well evidenced in New Zealand through a series of progressive legislation and policy regulations. For example, the shift to ‘mainstreaming’ education during the 1980s, the Human Rights Act (1993), the Special Education document 2000 (which was a strategy developed to provide equitable learning opportunities to all students), the New Zealand Disability Strategy (2001), and the State Services Toolkit for employing Disabled People (2016). Such initiatives indicate New Zealand’s alignment with international trends in respect of disability rights, such as the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), but are also a reflection of local disability rights campaigns, such as those policies advocated by DPA (New Zealand’s Disabled Person’s Assembly) and ACHIEVE (New Zealand’s National Post-Secondary Education Disability Network Incorporated). The groundswell of the disability movement both internationally and nationally has clearly impacted New Zealand’s government strategy and policy regarding inclusion in education. However, the pertinent question in terms of this discussion is to what extent have these legislative and policy initiatives in New Zealand created alternative subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999) to those subjects which are constructed as ‘less than’ due to an education context that does not provide the opportunity for equality narratives to be accessible for all? That is, regardless of how well the inclusion policies might read, have they made a tangible difference for people who are at risk of being disadvantaged and marginalised within education?

In respect to inclusive education in New Zealand, Rutherford’s (2009, 2014) studies indicate that while the ‘government set a target of 100% of schools demonstrating inclusive practices… [with] a programme of activities to achieve this’, many students were not experiencing inclusive and equitable learning opportunities. She found a number of common teacher attitudes, classroom practices and curriculum expectations that devalued and disabled certain students (p. 246). Not least of which was that students assessed as qualifying for a teacher aide were typically provided with a person who had no teacher training because they were cheaper to employ:

> The relative lack of knowledge and experience in supporting a student with complex learning characteristics suggest little attention was being paid to what would best serve the student’s educational interests. Once again it is useful to consider the parallels with the majority of students in schools, whose right of access to qualified teachers is unquestioned. (Rutherford, 2014, p. 248)

Accordingly, the resourcing model for inclusive education has been challenged by Rutherford (2014) and others (Ballard, 2013; Bourke, 2010; Duckworth, Thomas, & Bland, 2016; Reay, 2012; Thomas, 2013) as symbolic of ‘values and attitudes of those who hold power… that [need] to move from privileging the rights and opportunities of those believed to be of greater value, to the authentic recognition of the worth and right of all students to a good education’ (Rutherford, 2014, p. 249).

Part of the problem in obtaining Rutherford's call to such a 'fundamental change' to how we understand inclusion in education is that medical discourse positions disabled students as 'abnormal' and 'other'. Free market consumerist discourse similarly positions students as 'less valuable' if they are unable to demonstrate expected standards of learning and achieving. Such students are potentially less attractive to schools because current structures within education mean schools compete against one another in regard to: enrolment numbers, assessment outcomes, notable sporting and cultural performances. And although negative views towards those students who will not enhance the reputation of the school is not in accordance with current New Zealand Ministry of Education policies, it is probably not uncommon for people to believe that discrimination against lesser performing students is justified on the terms of free market consumerism:

> Schools in a free market should be able to choose their customers. Particular pupils will not be welcome at particular schools because they will be viewed, for example, as unsuitable material… ultimately damaging to the status of the school. (Barton, 1993, p. 36)

Therefore, in direct violation to the principles of inclusion within education, the free market consumerist emphases of 'surplus, control, speed, convenience, competition and individualism' (Block, Brueggemann, & McKnight, 2016, p. 22) has constructed schools and higher education as fiscal enterprises with productivity targets. They are in the business of graduating students who have proven they are individually self-disciplined, competitive consumers, orientated towards achieving perfection and ready for employment and/or further education. Moreover, they are motivated by the realities of economic survival. One way universities in New Zealand have responded to this challenge is to attract students to enrol with their institution by offering 'millions of dollars in scholarships and fee reductions… for people leaving school with excellence, or even merit results, in NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) (Gerritsen, 2016). But what does this New Right bias within education mean for those students who learn more slowly, or learn better in groups, or need kinaesthetic learning opportunities, or for whom collective assessment processes would better fit their relational cultural ways of being, or whose families' expectations and responsibilities are culturally embedded as requiring prioritisation over academic deadlines. Similarly, those who have been exposed to violence and addiction, or whose cultural identities and indigenous language have been de-valued and silenced and so they have also taken up identity stories which de-value, or whose body aesthetic of difference means they are positioned as 'other' and not like 'normal' students? How does inclusion work for students such as these within our current free market consumerist constituted education?

An assumption inherent within inclusive education is that an ideal education system is one that generates outcomes in keeping with its aim of equality for all. Unfortunately, this assumption may not necessarily be so prioritised by the current free market consumerist influence within education. For example, the trend continues within higher education for more and more programmes that are specific to 'industry that [then] offload the cost of education onto the public… [with] the

belief that a small minority of well-educated people can sustain an economy that pays low wages for everyone else' (Block et al., 2016, p. 38). In other words, it is not in the market's interests (and by default those who are wealthy enough to benefit from the market) to have all students succeed at school and within higher education. The market actually only needs a select few to succeed. If this is the case, then no amount of inclusive education policies and rhetoric will balance the playing field. What we need instead is a viable alternative to the free market consumerist construction of education. James K.A. Smith has suggested a different possibility:

> What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the formation of hearts and desires? What if we began by appreciating how education not only gets into our head but also (and more fundamentally) grabs us by the gut – what the New Testament refers to as kardia, 'the heart'? What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions – our visions of 'the good life' – and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? And what if this has as much to do with our bodies as our minds? What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love? (Smith, 2009, pp. 17–18)

But if, as Rutherford's (2009, 2011, 2014) research suggests, schools' teacher attitudes, classroom practices and curriculum expectations are prohibitive of inclusion within education occurring consistently or well, then we might well ask: What is required for educators to take up an alternative education discourse that prioritises imagination, creativity, passion, hope, love, somatic integrated learning and so forth, so as to not exclude students who struggle to meet prevalent ideas of normality and success? By its very intent, such a question implores the sociological imagination, for as Mills originally illuminated:

> Every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he (sic) lives out a biography, and that he (sic) lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he (sic) is made by society and by its historical push and shove. (2000, pp. 5–6)

When we as educators today actively seek to construct an alternative education discourse to that which has been shaped by the neo liberal agenda, we are taking up the opportunity to consciously engage and resist aspects of the push and shove of education discourse within its current sequence in history. In doing so, with the purpose of education becoming more inclusive for all students, we are inevitably swimming against the tide of medical and free market consumerist discourse.

The experience of swimming against, or albeit not being drowned by, medical discourse and the neo liberal agenda within education is now explored through an analysis of six case studies, which illustrate just how hard it really can be to resist the re-production of deficit subject positions within education. The first two case studies portray disabled school students who have very little narrative and discursive resources to call on when attempting to refuse subject positions of abject discrimination at school, with the consequence of them then inhabiting and

struggling with disabling narratives long after they had left school. The next three case studies illustrate how subject positions of deficit for students or staff with illness and/or disability can be hard to recognise and refuse; particularly when the discriminatory actions are constructed as reasonable, legitimate and even compassionate responses to a student's disorganisation, absence of focus or the assumed limitations of a person who has an illness or disability. The final case study explores the discursive intersections at play when a tertiary attendance policy for onsite block intensives was reviewed due to student complaints arguing it was inequitable and unreasonable. Overall, the case studies illustrate how the task of navigating potentially competing discursive agendas is more complicated than anticipated but essential if increased inclusion for marginalised students is deemed critical for students' positive life-long learning trajectories (Colley, Chadderton, & Nixon, 2014).

In regard to the history of the case studies, they have been generated from three sources: a narrative and discursive study of disabled people's actions of agency (Arkwright, 2011), an auto ethnographic account by the author as a wheelchair user when participating in a new employee orientation programme (Arkwright, 2005), and a consultation paper about a student attendance policy review (Arkwright, 2014).

In prioritising a discursive exploration of the case studies they have been arranged according to three thematic sub headings: disabling school narratives, paternalistic discrimination, the equity challenge of students' exceptional circumstances.

## Disabling School Narratives

### ***David***

David was an adult when interviewed about his experiences of education. He was born with cerebral palsy and spoke about his schooling (which was during the 1980s and early 1990s) as initially being 'ever fresh'. He said classmates 'slipped their pencils on to my desk' when his had broken; during the cross-country race 'I would be the slowest… but everyone would run at my pace so we'd all come in together'; when swimming in the school pool, he would participate by pulling himself along the rail and then 'we would all celebrate together at the end of the pool'; and at the end of the school day he and his friends 'would walk home together and there were often many ways to walk home, but we intuitively would take an easy way to walk home because they knew that I was having trouble with hills'. As a result of these experiences, David said his friends were 'like brothers' and he felt 'valuable' and 'likeable'. From hearing these stories, it would almost appear that James K.A. Smith's vision for education was being realised 40 years prior to him articulating it; and interestingly, when inclusive education and the disability movement were in their very formative stages and had barely begun to impact New Zealand.

However, David's story changed when he was 10 years of age. His identity shifted from a boy who felt 'valuable' and 'likeable' to someone who was 'ugly', 'abhorrent', 'disgusting' and 'disdained'. He recalled how one event became his 'gateway to dual identity and disability': It began with a playground 'tussle' between him and his best friend but it then escalated to name calling when his friend called him a 'spastic' and then other children joined in and also called him 'spastic' and 'retard'. David said until that moment, he had never heard the word 'spastic' before. The effect on him he said was 'like a staple in my heart, it felt like a staple gun through my chest'. David said he got up and said 'no way', he was 'not a spastic', he was 'no different' but then they called him 'a liar'. David said the group by then had 'circled' him and one child said 'you don't belong with us anymore David, you belong in an institution'. He also recalled his friend throwing him to the ground and when he tried to stand up and hit back, he said another boy hit him back to the ground. David finished the story by saying that after being 'hit down' he 'stayed down'.

David's account, following his telling of this event, was punctuated with him speaking of more discriminatory and cruel interactions towards him from a number of different people – peers, a teacher, parents' of other students. His early experiences of being able to participate in all school activities also changed. For example, during secondary school, David's peers were no longer running the cross-country race at his pace, as they did in his early years of schooling when they all finished the race as a group so as to accommodate David's physical capacities. Instead, David said 'it was so competitive and nasty and cut throat, that everyone's gone home and they're pulling down the track and I'm still running the f***** thing'. Opportunities for participation and inclusion within school activities became rarer for David and segregation from his non-disabled peers occurred once he received additional tutoring. He noted 'the more support I got from disability resource, the more my friends hated me'.

Fortunately, David's pre-teen and early teenage narratives of exclusion and failure were side-stepped one day when a subject position of respect was offered to him. He was carrying his father's briefcase when down-town and shopkeepers would come up to him and say 'excuse me sir can I help you, would you like to buy something?' David said this response was very different than how shopkeepers usually responded to him, which was to 'think I was dumb'. He said, 'it took me a while to figure out, it was this briefcase!' David concluded that they thought he was intelligent because of the briefcase and that 'I must be a businessman! [it was a] key moment…it changed my thinking about hey, it's not me, it's their interpretation, it's their perception and not more than that, much less than that, it's over a bloody briefcase which is $11.50 in the shops. For $11.50 I can change my whole sociological world'.

The briefcase became David's concrete metaphor for resisting the subject position of spasticity. In carrying a briefcase, he was embodying the Western free market consumerist ideal of individual success. It became the beginning point for David to dispute and refuse the discrimination he had been experiencing since he was 10 years of age. However, the refusal of disablist discourse was ultimately

not triumphant. David said that despite having therapy that the 'weeds of his character' that had grown from the original playground incident many years earlier still haunted him. It was with shock when I learned that four years after I had interviewed David, he had taken his own life.

David's story provides much in terms of developing our learning about inclusion in education. The contextual emphasis on acceptance and participation that typically characterises early childhood education and the early primary school years praxis worked well for David. In comparison, the neo liberal discursive practices of competition and achievement, and the medical discourse's objectification of difference which flourish so well in the enacted and unspoken messages of middle and later years schooling, only offered David subject positions of failure and exclusion. Without an alternate subject position being offered to David through the briefcase experience, David would most likely not have re-claimed any of his earlier 'likeable' and 'valuable' narrative, gained by feeling connected to others and the world around him. Overall, however, David's story is a sobering and very painful reminder of the critical importance of inclusion narratives being fostered for children and young adults through education.

## ***Ron***

At the time that I interviewed Ron he was middle-age and so his schooling was during the 1970s–1980s. As a young child Ron was a reasonably frequent hospital in-patient due to having surgeries for facial deformities. He was also born with partial hearing in one ear and deaf in the other ear, and had a speech impairment.

Ron's memories of childhood were that things were 'not good', of being 'treated badly [and] bullied', and he couldn't remember 'any happy times'. For example, he recalled a scene when he was in hospital as a child: 'I entered the staff dining room and apparently the room went quiet, absolutely stony, stony quiet and [name of the surgeon] just said without looking up "And whose is that?"' Such an experience positioned Ron as powerless, objectified by the power relation of medical practice. This was common for Ron, especially during his school years. For example, one of Ron's teachers did not believe he had a hearing problem and thought he was 'just being naughty' and put his desk 'at the rear of the class facing the back wall'. Another teacher 'renowned for picking on kids' sent Ron 'downstairs to the new entrants' class… to sit on the mat for half an hour', a directive which Ron considered was connected to his speech impairment. Moreover, during tertiary training, Ron found his classmates surprised when he scored top in a test. He said his peers assumed that 'because I had a speech problem, I had to have an intellectual problem too'.

In response to these experiences, Ron storied himself as second to others, which became a subject position that was familiar to him and even preferred by him. He said,

> *I'm only striving to be normal, so I don't see the things I've done with my speech as extra to what a lot of people have… I'm not normal'. I still believe it's only me coming up to,*

*coming up to 'normal' because I'm in deficit mode [but] I think that is just the way it is and I don't think I'd actually like it any other way… I don't believe I'm ever going to be number one, number two is forever going to be the best place because you're forever working.*

Being 'number two' was Ron's narrative but it is interesting to consider what difference inclusion within his education and medical experiences would have made for him. Presumably, he may not have had the anxiety associated with expecting to take up subject positions of rejection and failure. For example, he recounted how he had applied for a course in the helping professions and first, anticipated not being accepted and then when he was accepted, considered a mistake had been made and that he would not be able to succeed:

*For that entire [enrolment] interview, I don't think I strung together a coherent sentence.. and I came out and I thought 'Well, I've stuffed that up, what am I going to do now?'… it's quite strange, because I've spoken to [the interviewer] a couple of times since… and I actually said to him, 'How the hell did I get through it?', so I still don't actually know. If I was in (the interviewer's) shoes, I probably would have said, 'Where's the bin!?' At the end of the day, after the interview, I adopted the 'Oh, well, that isn't going to work'[attitude] and started looking for something else… it's probably [something I have] learnt from past episodes of ridicule, past episodes of apprehension… but I've stepped into this [education] programme that will teach me, we hope, to make a living out of speaking to people – 'I can't do that, you're mad!'*

Despite Ron's negative perception about his ability to complete the education programme, he did graduate and gain employment in the field of his discipline. And interestingly, a few years later, he undertook and succeeded with postgraduate study. Without interviewing Ron again, it is not possible to gauge how much he succeeds in resisting the internalised 'I can't' narrative but two graduations later and working as a practice professional would suggest that being accepted into programmes which required communication skills was helpful for him in refusing deficit subject positions. For this to happen, the enrolment educators who interviewed Ron had to first resist the discursive positioning of Ron as unsuitable on the account of his speech and hearing impairment, and remaining facial deformity. Once an alternative 'acceptance' subject position was offered to Ron, he was provided the opportunity to also refuse the 'I can't' story he had held about himself. In other words, inclusivity begins with a systemic action that invites the individual to take up the subject positions of acceptance, belonging and inclusion.

## ***Sally***

Sally's parents' account of their daughter's first years at school is a much more recent story of a child's schooling experience, and subsequent to the introduction of inclusive education regulations, such as the *Special Education document 2000.*

The example of Sally is included as a case study within this discussion because it reminds us how deficit subject positioning of students can occur and be rationalised despite inclusion policies being mandated and actively promoted by a school

or higher education institute. Sally's story also demonstrates the importance of systemic actions for re-positioning students like her from deficit to more positive descriptions. And like Ron's story above, when this re-positioning happens to a non-included student, it provides the potential impetus for the student to take up and live out a more constructive account of herself or himself. Ultimately, this may be the difference between Sally not only succeeding at school but also proceeding to higher education after school.

Sally's beginning years were characterised by first critical and then chronic illness. Her illness still impacted her when she began school to the extent that she was quite frequently sick and absent from school, fatigued quickly – especially by the end of the day, and had difficulties keeping up in physical education. In addition, due to her immune system being compromised, she had had reduced experiences of social interaction with children of her own age, due to hospital admissions, having physical therapy appointments, and not attending kindergarten or early childhood education very often. Sally had been looking forward to school though but within two years she no longer wished to attend. Her parents spoke of a number of events that had upset them:

> *In her first year at school Sally over-reacted when other kids teased her and once she ripped up another child's work. The teacher then removed her desk from the other children and put a large cardboard screen between her and the other children so she couldn't see them. Another time, despite us having talked at length to the teacher about her condition, she had to do the same cross country training as the other children, even if she was miles behind the other children and on her own on the other side of two fields. When we complained to the Principal about this he said that he had spoken to the teacher who said that 'Sally was included in the PE because the teacher could still see her'! In year two, things didn't improve even though we had tried to explain things to the teacher and by the end of the year, the teacher was making a referral for Sally to be psychologically assessed.*

Sally's parents' concerns related to what they described as illness-related issues (including the impact of the illness on her ability to learn and socialise well), being viewed as Sally having behavioural and psychological problems. They said that when they questioned the teacher about this, they were told:

> *There is a lot of information in Sally's file regarding the medical issues and the effects these have on her but very little about issues that may relate to her inability to carry through on very routine tasks like bringing her diary to class, choosing a new book, eating her lunch, and social issues.*

In highlighting these concerns, the teacher is privileging a number of neo liberal ideals, such as efficiency, self-discipline, achievement, individualism, self-responsibility. Sally's parents were not unconcerned about these problems but were more concerned about Sally's overall experience of the school not providing adequate support or understanding of how hard things were for her or how tired she got.

In response to the teacher requesting a psychological assessment for Sally, the parents met with Sally's teacher and the Principal of the school. When Sally's parents suggested that Sally had not always experienced inclusion at school, the Principal replied that 'we are an inclusive school' and was sure that the problem was with Sally, not the school. Despite this viewpoint difference, it was agreed

that Sally would not be referred to Child Community Mental Health Services but instead would be referred to the RTLB service (Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour Service). Sally's parents said that the RTLB then spent a lot of time understanding Sally's challenges, including meeting with Sally's paediatrician. The RTLB insisted that Sally be not required to do cross-country training and refused the Principal's suggestion that he 'piggy back' Sally up the hills on the cross-country course so Sally could experience 'the sense of achievement in doing the cross country like all the other children'. Sally's parents and the RTLB did not think the 'piggy back' idea would provide Sally with a sense of inclusion but would further position her as different from the other children. The RTLB advocated for Sally to be the 'official photographer' for class during the cross-country as a way she could be included without being positioned in deficit. The RTLB also ensured that Sally was placed with a teacher of the RTLB's choice for the following year. Sally's parents said that the RTLB really just said what 'we had been saying for two years but suddenly the school was now listening because the RTLB was saying it!' They said that with a new teacher who was more patient and understanding, Sally coped much better at school and in a parent/teacher interview, the new teacher told them that 'Sally has a most beautiful heart, she is a pleasure to teach'.

What is interesting in this account is the power relation between the parents and the school, and the prominence of psychiatric discourse over medical discourse. Sally's difficulties were storied as behavioural and psychological by Sally's Year One and Year Two teachers, even though Sally's parents had been endeavouring to story them as illness-related issues. The school held their position of 'knowing' about Sally until a registered education professional (the RTLB) also refused the psychiatric discourse as a means of making sense of Sally's behaviour at school. It was not until this happened that the subject position of a child who was 'a pleasure to teach' was available to Sally. The parents' resilience to having their daughter's challenges storied as other than illness-related concerns and the strength-based interventions from the RTLB eventually disrupted the dominant medical model and neo liberal discursive practices of the school, enabling narratives of inclusion to become available to Sally at school.

## Paternalistic Discrimination

### *Carole*

Carole had a senior role within a university department and for several years had been living with a progressive neurological condition that had been impacting her physically. One of the challenges she spoke about was how she had become positioned at work since her illness. She said,

> *One of the things I notice is that people that know I'm living with an illness, out of kindness and to save me, people make judgements about what I can do and can't do but it*

*positions me as being globally disadvantaged rather than having a difficulty in a particular area. An example of that is at work…you know, I'm having struggles in my body but there is absolutely nothing wrong with my mind… out of kindness people have thought to protect me and have given other things to other people so I've actually been made less than an experienced [professional] based on the assumption that I can't take on extra stress or challenging work.*

Carole's point was that she was being positioned as 'globally disadvantaged' rather than 'having difficulty in a particular area'. Carole was not claiming that her illness did not affect her but that people's 'judgements' of what she 'can do and can't do' disadvantaged her. The difficulty for Carole was that such 'judgements' were not 'malicious' but motivated by kindness, endeavouring to 'save' and 'protect' her. She said, 'I got tripped up by what the motivation was for it… I felt that I lost my voice, I was silenced… if it had been malicious, I would easily have had plenty to say about it but because it was out of kindness I didn't know how to respond'.

Since having an illness, Carole had lost her sense of agency at work because she no longer had 'access to a subject position in which [she had] the right to speak and be heard' (Davies, 1991, p. 51). She described how she would try to resist when 'challenging work', that she would normally be given, was allocated to other people to do. She came to realise that 'kindness' prohibited people from hearing her when she said she 'liked' and 'was fine' to still do 'challenging work'. She said people responded by thinking she was 'protesting but not really meaning it'. 'Kindness', for Carole, was a subject position that was hard to refuse because it appeared benign. The paradox of 'kindness' producing effects that were not experienced as kind contributed to Carole's sense of alienation and exclusion at work. As a discursive practice, kindness is typically understood as a positive action but in this instance kindness was conflated with a paternalistic judgement that is more likely to have been constructed by the pathological lens of medical discourse than discourses which embody being kind to one another. What was required was for Carole's work colleagues, probably her head of department, to dialogue with her about how she was finding work with her illness, and ask if any support would be helpful. However, such conversations never occurred and Carole was positioned to either accept people's judgement of her as being 'less able' or protest and run the risk that she would be positioned as ungrateful for not accepting people's 'kindness'.

It is interesting to wonder if this experience for Carole would have been any different if the recently developed State Services Toolkit for employing Disabled People (2016) had existed at the time that she was dis-empowered by actions of 'kindness'. The toolkit encourages employers to develop an action plan for employing people with disabilities and seeks to 'de-bunk myths' about disabled people in the workforce. Whilst these steps are undoubtedly a great starting point for increasing inclusion for people with illness and/or disability within education contexts, dialogue with Carole would still have had to have occurred so as to ascertain her understandings of the support she might require at work. Without such dialogue, it is almost inevitable that unhelpful assumptions would be made

and deficit subject positions would construct Carole as 'less than' her boss and her colleagues. As Freire articulated some 40 years prior in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), genuine dialogue requires a stance of 'humility' and is an activity of 'encounter':

> Dialogue cannot exist without *humility*. The naming of the world, through which men (sic) constantly recreate that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of men (sic) addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack *humility*. How can I enter into dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I enter into dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from other men (sic) – mere 'its' in whom I cannot recognise another 'is'. How can I enter into dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of 'pure' men (sic), the owners of truth and knowledge, who all non-members are 'these people' or 'the great unwashed'? If I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of the elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration which is to be avoided, how can I hold a dialogue? Or if I am closed to – and even offended by – the contribution of others… how can there be dialogue?... Men (sic) who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself (sic) to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he (sic) can reach the point of *encounter*. At the point of *encounter* there are neither ignoramuses or perfect sages; there are only men (sic) who are attempting, together, to learn more than they know. (italics mine). (Freire, 1972, p. 63)

Dialogue with humility that involves a genuine encounter with the other person is critical to increasing experiences of inclusion and decreasing interactions that re-produce a sense of exclusion and alienation for the person who is positioned as 'other' within medical and free market consumerist discourse. Without such dialogue occurring, the person who is at risk of not experiencing inclusion – 'feeling like they are welcome, belong… and can participate in all aspects' of the education environment, is likely to disconnect from their social world in some way. Case in point, Carole said that she had not found a way of disclosing her illness without feeling 'worse about myself'. She responded by 'pulling right back' and not disclosing but then she said her 'secret world got bigger'. In explaining the phrase 'my secret world', Carole said:

> *It is how it really is, how I feel… people walk in and out of bits of it [the secret world], no one would have all of it but me and [husband's name] would probably have the most of it [but] there would be parts only I have because that's the thing with chronicity. I don't enjoy it [the secret world] (said quietly). I feel quite depressed by it.*

Carole's secret world was added to by assumed actions of 'kindness' towards her at work, whereas the new territory of her living and working with an illness could have potentially been a site of 'encounter' for Carole and her colleagues in respect to what Freire termed, the 'naming of the world' – the construction of new 'truth and knowledge'. But without such dialogue, no inclusion occurs and no increase to humanity transpires. In this instance, for dialogue to have occurred, Carole's head of department would have had to have solicited her 'contribution' to making-meaning about the impact of her illness on her capacity at work.

The invitation to 'contribute' to 'truth and knowledge' in a new naming 'of the world' is what has been missing from these case study examples. In the previous

case studies, David was initially positioned as a ‘contributor’ but then was re-positioned as a ‘spastic’ who ‘belonged in an institution’. Ron and Sally were never positioned as contributors, and nor were Sally’s parents – or at least not without the RTLB joining with them in their meaning-making. The positioning that is synonymous with being an educator is one of knowing and contributing according to the dominant discursive terms of education and the educator. Such knowing is important for informing what creates effective education practice but it becomes an ‘act of arrogance’ (as Freire declared) when it is imposed on people for whom the Educator’s knowing cannot claim ‘to know’. Sally’s teacher was claiming a ‘knowing’ that her parents refuted and Carole’s head of department assumed a ‘knowing’ of what would be best for Carole that Carole herself did not find accurate for her. When this happens, there is little or no engagement with Freire’s notion of authentic education that is ‘not carried on by A *for* B or by A *about* B, but rather A *with* B’ (italics in text) (Freire, 1972, p. 66). The ‘with’ position is essential for inclusion to occur when a person or persons are at risk of being positioned as ‘other’.

The next case study is drawn from one of my own experiences. It illustrates how inquiry into another person’s experience, whilst perhaps appearing to represent an invitation for myself to ‘contribute’ knowledge, is undertaken in a manner that, as Freire espoused, ‘projects ignorance’ from the subject position of being a member of the ‘in-group’.

## *James*

I have provided a longer description and analysis of this account elsewhere (Arkwright, 2005) but for the sake of economy, I will just provide a very brief context for the inquiry which enacted a discriminatory power relation. The incident happened when I was at a meeting with other educators. There were approximately 30 people in the room and we were all meeting each other for the first time. The ‘Chair’ of the meeting asked each person to introduce themselves. I was the last person to introduce myself and when it came to my turn to say my name and where I worked, the ‘Chair’ of the meeting suddenly interjected and asked me ‘what do you suffer?’ At this point, I was positioned according to the terms of medical, not professional discourse. I remember providing some kind of slightly incoherent explanation about my spinal cord injury to which afterward, my rehearsed statement of my name and my work no longer seemed so relevant. What the question effectively did, in that setting, was strip me of my professional identity, and even the meaning of disability was defined for me; it meant ‘to suffer’. It is a good example of how one person’s meeting the terms of dominant discourse, on this occasion medical discourse, elevates the person to experience a sense of entitlement over those who fail to meet the terms of the dominant discourse. Such entitlement rarely provides a power relation of humility where a genuine encounter between people can take place, and at the same time, the

paternalistic actions are not recognised as discriminatory. That is, it is most likely that neither Carole's head of department nor the Chair of the meeting I attended would have considered their actions problematic in any way; they may have even storied themselves as being compassionate and caring.

## The Equity Challenge of Students' Exceptional Circumstances

Having a difference of view about an event or interaction between educators and students or heads of department and education staff is problematic, inevitably leading to a power relation where a subject position of disadvantage is likely to occur for those who are less able to meet the terms of the dominant discourse; in these cases, most likely the students and the staff. As discussed, what is required when this 'difference' happens is first recognition by those who are advantaged in the power relation that a perceptual difference has occurred, and second, that dialogue and a genuine encounter is attempted so as to understand what the respective differences of opinion are.

In this final case study, an example is provided of a difference of view transpiring between a number of students formally complaining about a tertiary institution's policy on student attendance, and educators who had either created the policy or were positioned to be loyal to the policy as part of their professional practice as educators and employees of the institute. The discursive challenge of trying to address the students' challenge of the policy while engaging with the educators responses to the challenge was quite complex but assisted by the processes of discursive deconstruction, dialogue and authentic encounter, and systemic change.

The student complaints centred on a policy which stated that attendance must be no less than 80% of an onsite block intensive course. Such courses are usually two or three days in duration and are in the context of a distance learning programme, and are regulated as requiring compulsory attendance by all students enrolled in the paper. Over a number of years, some students have viewed the policy as 'not fair' when a person experienced a death in the family, had a medical emergency or similar kind of critical incident. If the student missed more than 20% of the intensive and had to re-enrol in the paper the following year, it often meant that their programme of study could be extended by up to a year due to the disruption of their study pattern.

When educators discussed the policy in light of the student complaints, there was initially no consensus regarding whether the policy should be changed or not. Discursive viewpoints traversed ideas about justice, cultural differences, compassion, professional practice, curriculum, pedagogy, studentship, faith and ethics. In responding to these respective discursive conflicts (Arkwright, 2014), it became helpful to ask 'what is key for studentship when studying to be a counsellor or social worker?' A number of helpful ideas emerged in the deconstruction of this question such as: that the ethics binding professional practice were different than

those defining studentship because work (for the most part) does not involve continuous new learning, while study does, which means that work can be missed but study may not be able to be missed; that consistency between the ethics of the institute and programme policy was important and that in regard to the policy an ethical response should incorporate both 'a universal application' and 'flexibility to grant leniency' options; and that the challenge of a student making-up their learning when having missed part or all of an intensive could potentially lead to the opportunity for pedagogical innovation to occur.

The dialogue about the policy became a site for contribution between staff and from students, with the result that a sub-committee was established that would process applications for exemptions from an intensive attendance. The criteria for application, and the process for assessing applications for attending less than 80% of an intensive, stayed consistent with the key focus of maintaining quality studentship. At the same time, the exemptions criteria also needed to ensure that there would be no undue compromising of the quality of the programme's curriculum and pedagogy, the ethics of professional practice, and the consistency between policy and policy execution. Notably, since the policy change and the implementation of the policy sub-committee, there have been no complaints from either students or staff, and interestingly, very few applications to process.

It would appear that having an avenue for education not being exclusive when an exceptional circumstance has interrupted study, has decreased student (and staff) dissatisfaction. Or as Foucault may have explained it, where there is power, there is resistance (Foucault, 1980). So without unnecessary use of power, there has been no resistance to the Institute's amended policy on intensive attendance. And while it may have been easier for us as educators to legitimate and not attempt to deconstruct the 'students must attend the onsite block intensive in order to not have their programme of study and the quality of our graduates compromised' it would have only perpetuated the conflict and difference between students and the educators, and also between educators. However, by entering into 'problem posing' (Freire, 1972) dialogue about the policy, as educators we became more conscious of the competing discursive agendas competing for ascendancy, and we were able to negotiate a new narrative of 'universal application' with 'flexibility to grant leniency'. As a consequence, we have an increased capacity to offer subject positions of inclusion when exceptional circumstances arise for students.

## Conclusion

The case studies of David, Ron, Sally, Carole, James, and the policy on attendance at onsite block intensive courses have been an attempt within the limitations of this chapter, to illustrate how critical the processes of discursive deconstruction, dialogue and systemic interventions are for creating inclusion and equality for all

within education. When these processes are done well, discriminatory power relations occur less frequently and those who have been positioned to take up subject positions of deficit will be dialogued with and invited to contribute their meaning-making to problem posing discussions with educators who can learn and create change.

It is challenging to negotiate successfully between educators' expectations that have often been captured by medical and neo liberal norms, inclusive policies and those specific to an institution's distinctive, competing cultural imperatives, and the respective capacities and often assumed limitations of students and/or staff who are positioned in deficit terms. Ultimately though, if successful, education will become more inclusive for the marginalised thereby closer approximating the regulation of inclusive education policies. James K.A. Smith's hope for a different kind of education that truly is for all – not the select few, which connects with one's body and heart and intellect – may be closer to being realised. Moreover, medical and free market consumerist discourse in education will be considered for their respective merits and disadvantages, and alternative discourses will also be heard and shaping of education. If this can be achieved, then the result is likely to be much more creative, innovative and inclusive than simply giving a child a piggy back up a hill that she cannot easily walk.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. How well do education policies designed to support students to be included, actually achieve inclusion for those students at risk of being marginalised and excluded?
2. What educator expectations and actions support (or conversely, limit) inclusion-oriented policies being realised in practice for students or staff who are not experiencing being well supported or understood?
3. To what extent do you experience or witness educators being caught between the often competing discursive realities of 'student achievement' and 'inclusion'? What do you notice relative to educator interactions with one another and with students when these different discourses vie for ascendency? In those interactions, what might support ideas about inclusion to be grappled with and not lost under the pressures to normalise and endorse practices that advance competition, individualism, perfection and competency, in ways that typically advantage some but not all students?
4. What kinds of institutional policies, structures and practices do you think give permission for educators to be creative and attempt to negotiate a both/and position between 'achievement' and 'inclusion, thereby offering something of a counter position to the free market consumerist ideals within education of competition, individualism and self-discipline, which marginalised students are often not well positioned to meet?

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# Chapter 3
# Learning Cultures, Reflexivity and Creative Subversion

**David James**

**Abstract** In a book originally published in 1984, Pierre Bourdieu wrote that although we need to know about the processes of arriving at social science research outcomes in order to fully appreciate them, '(t)he finished product, the *opus operatum* [the work and its effects], conceals the *modus operandi* [the particular way it was made] …You are never taken into the back-rooms, the kitchens of science'. Bourdieu's own stance was the opposite, in seeing a thoroughgoing reflexivity as a condition of doing good, worthwhile social science research. Here 'thoroughgoing' means setting out the researcher's own social relationship to what is being studied. In this chapter, I want to suggest that something similar pertains in the case of social science teaching that is good and worthwhile. In doing so, I am not just expressing pedagogical preferences: rather I am suggesting that in the social sciences, reflexivity and criticality are constitutive and are part of what should be learnt by both students and teachers, and that the best teaching is dependent on the capacity and willingness of the teacher to help their students unpack the 'what normally goes without saying' of both the substance and the process of the social science course, module, lecture, seminar or assessment. Thus, I want to argue that it is practical, useful and even necessary to bring to bear a sociological imagination when we work out what to teach and how to teach it in the social sciences.

## A Learning Cultures Perspective

How can the teacher in higher education achieve this in respect of the process as well as the substance of their practices? Whilst it is by no means the only approach we can take, a 'learning cultures' perspective is a helpful starting point. This was first developed in research on Further Education in England within the Economic and Social Research Council-funded project *Transforming Learning*

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*Cultures in Further Education* (TLCFE), which ran from 2001 to 2005 (ESRC Ref L139251025). Part of a much larger programme of work called the *Teaching and Learning Research Programme* (ESRC TLRP), the research itself was applied and practice-based: in Furlong and Oancea's terms, it was 'research conducted in, with and/or for practice' (2005, p. 9). At the design stage there was close consultation with groups of people working in various roles in the FE sector in England. Once under way, the project's core team blurred the usual boundary between 'researchers' and 'the researched', incorporating project directors and researchers from four universities and seconded staff from four FE colleges. An extended team also included 'participating tutors' who were both subjects of the research and partners in the research process. The scale and scope of the project, and its 'long, thin' design, allowed an unusually close look at a cross-section of teaching and learning practices in English FE, with the core fieldwork lasting around two years. We used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, with data gathered through interviews with tutors, students and managers, student questionnaires, classroom observations, extensive tutor diaries, records of peer shadowing, and a range of documents. The main aims of the project were to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning in FE and to identify, implement and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities.

The aim to understand the complexities of learning was chosen and refined with great care. The need for it was evident across many of the stakeholders we consulted, amongst whom there was a strong view that institutions, and the systems in which they operated, were preventing the maintenance of high quality learning and preventing improvement towards it. One major problem seemed to be that learning itself was often narrowly conceived and constructed: it was primarily understood and managed through dominant, highly reified institutional categories and devices like 'level' and the number of qualifications achieved at different 'levels', or understood in ways that appeared to be derived, if rather loosely, from what we might term a *psychological* imagination – for example, as a cognitive process of acquisition which could be made more efficient by the measurement of individual 'learning style' (Coffield, Moseley, Halle, & Ecclestone, 2004). Against this backdrop, the project included a strong collective desire to approach learning from a more ethnographic, even 'anthropological' starting point, asking questions like 'what is happening here in the name of learning, and how does that align with the claims made by individuals and institutions?' Certain theoretical sources were therefore compelling allies in the research, including Bourdieu, Dewey, and Lave & Wenger's situated learning theory (for an account of the theoretical side of the project, see Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007; James & Biesta, 2007).

The most concise definition of a learning culture arising from the research was that it is 'the social practices through which people learn', but accompanying this is always the recognition that a learning culture allows, enables, inhibits or rules out certain kinds of learning (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 23). However, it is also helpful to conceive a learning culture as an assembly of inter-connected

elements arranged in a series of concentric circles around any given practice. Such elements, which are always dynamic, would include:

- The positions, dispositions, actions and interactions of students and tutors;
- The nature of subject content and identity, particularly in relation to other disciplines and activities;
- College management and organisation, physical location and resourcing;
- National policies and regimes for funding, quality and inspection;
- Wider social and economic contexts.

Crucially, then, the concept of ‘learning culture’ challenges the idea that teaching, learning or assessment are best understood as highly circumscribed and fundamentally individual, mainly cognitive activities that happen to be located in an institutional, geographical, political or economic context or setting. The concept implies an epistemological shift away from individual and decontextualised notions and towards seeing learning as sets of practices that both *represent* and *re-present* social arrangements. Practices of teaching and learning embody, reproduce and sometimes challenge social structures, relationships and beliefs. The research revealed how a great deal of what happens in the name of learning, in FE colleges at least, was highly structured by systems and mechanisms of inspection, funding and audit as well as the position of the course in various hierarchies of provision. Also important was the nature of the relationship to a vocational field, or to other vocational and academic programmes and how they are positioned against one another. Teachers, managers and students did a great deal to reshape these effects in various ways, and were themselves important contributors to the learning culture in accordance with their dispositions, values or pedagogic preferences. Nevertheless, it was all too easy to overestimate their power and autonomy, especially in the case of teachers: whilst teachers were increasingly individually held accountable for the nature and quality of teaching and learning, their scope to intervene, to act to bring about improvements in teaching and learning, was often very limited indeed. Sometimes an entire set of preparations and arrangements, designed on the basis of strong evidence to support learning, were dismantled, regardless of the quality of the rationale underpinning them, or whatever the wishes of the teacher(s) concerned. The project demonstrated that the learning culture presented a series of constraints and affordances, which although they reflected concerns of a financial, managerial, accountability and quality measurement nature had powerful and immediate pedagogic effects (James & Wahlberg, 2007). These include learning in the deep sense of students learning who they could become or were becoming, often relative to other courses or institutions (in a sense, learning to know their place in a hierarchy of subjects, institutions, occupations and workplaces).

Whilst both the ‘learning cultures’ perspective and the analysis of the TLCFE project clearly pertain to the English Further Education sector, the approach can be applied to other institutionalized teaching and learning arrangements, such as those in universities. To date, I have only tried to do this focusing on theories,

policies and practices of assessment in HE, choosing this topic on the grounds that so much of what happens in teaching and learning in higher education is dominated by concepts and practices of assessment. There is not the space here to go into a great deal of detail, but the bare bones of this attempt to extend the approach are worth a brief consideration.

## Applying a Learning Cultures Perspective to Higher Education

I have argued elsewhere (James, 2014) that in the research-based literature on assessment in HE there are three strong perspectives or conceptual discourses, namely the *technical*, the *humanistic* and the *interactionist*. I will return to the third of these later in this chapter. The first one, the technical, is closely in tune with institution-level texts about assessment, which specify regulation and procedures that are designed to achieve goals to do with standards, validity, reliability, transparency, fairness, the alignment of learning outcomes with assessment criteria, and so forth. A good example of research-based work in this perspective would be that of Biggs, on 'constructive alignment'. Biggs sets out a compelling argument about how we might achieve optimum alignment or integration between the main components of a teaching and learning situation (e.g. the learning environment, activities, assessment and learning outcomes) (Biggs, 2003). It is worth noting that increasingly, institutional governance of assessment has additional goals that are more institutionally pragmatic such as (a) attempting to maximize scores in national student surveys that change public perceptions of quality through the generation of league-tables (especially with regard to student recognition that they are receiving feedback); and (b) avoiding appeals and litigation by tightening procedures.

The second, *humanistic* perspective is one that forms an important conceptual anchorage for many of those responsible for staff and educational development: however it is much less common amongst teachers, managers and administrators in HE. Thinking within this perspective questions the co-existence, in HE provision, of contradictory models of the person (Heron, 1988), or of learning (Boud, 1990). More recent work of a similar nature sets out how an endemic lack of trust (Carless, 2009) or an over-reliance on analytic grading (Sadler, 2009) continually undermine the potential for assessment to support learning. This work is valuable and important, but like that of Biggs mentioned above, it tends to overestimate the scope for teachers to act to bring about change. In such work, a sophisticated and well-informed *diagnosis* is followed by implicit or explicit *remedies* that are addressed to the key professionals (usually, teachers). The implication is that teachers (and perhaps curriculum developers) in higher education are in a position to change the learning culture for the better in the light of research evidence. Whilst this is of course a reasonable proposition in isolation, it can only be part of the story if we take a learning cultures perspective.

The learning cultures approach can offer a helpful set of tools for the higher education teacher who wishes to develop a sociological understanding of their

own work as an educator and a critical appreciation of the opportunities it may contain for innovation. The approach helps us to see how the teacher is but one element in a whole set of intersecting forces that determine the nature of teaching and learning, and these forces include interests for goals *other than, and in addition to*, maximizing the occurrence of worthwhile learning from the teacher's own viewpoint. For example, assessment regimes are often designed so as to allow a large number of individual marks to be combined, using algorithms, to produce a final grade or degree classification. Of itself, this may look both sophisticated and benign, but it smuggles in particular pre-constructed views of learning, measurement, persons, capacities and achievements. These may be at odds with some learning goals and with the values of some teachers and other stakeholders, such as employers. For example, some sets of learning goals or outcomes are most logically and realistically assessed as 'pass' or 'fail' (perhaps with one or two higher categories of 'pass', such as 'merit' and 'distinction'), either because they signal a threshold level of capacity or competence, or because they allude to the nature of student development, or student engagement with problems or concepts, or to some other aspect of process and application. In this situation the establishment of a numerical scale can introduce a great deal of spurious granularity and can impose a completely inappropriate expectation that all marks should approximate to a normal distribution. It may also, ironically, bring a new source of volatility and could even disadvantage certain students if the assessing teacher remains faithful to longer-standing aims, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and the conceptions of learning that underpin them.

To illustrate this point, let's imagine a situation in which an institution replaces broad categorical assessment (perhaps 'pass', 'fail' and 'distinction') with a 0–100 marking scale, and a standard pass-mark of 40. If the assessing teacher judges that the student has met a threshold assessment criterion (such as 'the student understands the concepts of correlation and causality and the nature of evidence pertaining to each'), what mark should be awarded? Should it be 40, or 100? A mark of 40 may be valid in terms of a threshold assessment criterion but in the new regime would seem unfair, exerting great downward pressure on a student's overall average, and the assessor is therefore under pressure to 'play the game' as set by the new regime so as not to disadvantage the student. At the same time, the guidance for awarding marks between 40 and 100 is not likely to be very useful in this instance. The teacher will find themselves forced into trying to work out what mark between 40 and 100 is appropriate, when the only logical judgement, in respect of the particular criterion, is 'yes' or 'no'. The assessment task is unlikely to have generated sufficient information for anything more than an educated guess to be made about what sort of 'yes' or 'no' should be expressed and with what number. The net result is a lack of clarity for all parties about what is being assessed and how, and greatly increased scope for idiosyncratic marking in a set of arrangements that paradoxically appear to offer greater granularity or even 'accuracy'. In most institutional settings, the views of a teacher or team on this point are likely to have little purchase, because the assessment regime (a) is institutionally centralised, and (b) serves many purposes whether or not these are

compatible with the course team's own particular view of learning, learning outcomes, pedagogy and assessment.

The assessment regime represents interests beyond those of teachers, and is a powerful shaper of the learning culture. Its features may be designed (or have evolved) to minimize the risk of plagiarism or cheating, to ensure that at least part of the response to tasks is entirely the individual's own work. They may respond to the wishes of managers, external examiners and professional bodies as much or more than they respond to the needs of students or teaching staff. Assessment criteria may be written to reflect a generic institutional view or a range of levels of achievement seen as suitable for all students and all curriculum areas or disciplines at undergraduate level.

The research literature on assessment does bear witness to a gradual increase over time in acknowledgment of the significance of context and culture when trying to understand concepts, practices and possibilities. For example, Boud (2009) observes that assessment is often reified and essentialised as if it was not a social process of judgement: he points out that learning is always embodied and that there are strong emotional investments and effects when it comes to the assessment of learning. Similarly, recent research on assessment feedback (Molloy & Boud, 2013) illustrates how, compared to earlier usage in engineering and cybernetics, the concept of feedback in use in HE and professional assessment regimes is often weak, stopping as it does with the delivery of detailed commentary rather than incorporating further observation and engagement with the process of change. This is a crucial observation about a lack of sociological imagination in the form of a commonplace denial of the social dimensions of assessment feedback, and Molloy and Boud describe how assessment practices may be 'formulaic' or stuck in 'transmissive-style rituals' (p. 30). The difficulty is that their analysis stops at this complaint, and does not go on to provide an understanding of how and why such arrangements persist. From a learning cultures perspective, the practices are unlikely to be merely the product of happenstance, habit, tradition, ignorance or idiosyncrasy. More likely is that the volume of assessment and the accompanying workload makes even the achievement of one-off and timely 'feedback' very difficult, and that student demand, in the light of the consumerist effects of fees, creates a preference for current practices. Thus, 'transmissive-style rituals' may be entirely functional social practices serving institutional needs and serving many students in ways they expect and recognise. The problems cannot be overcome, and the promise of the proposed remedy cannot be realised, through appeals to the university teacher to do better.

My suggestion is that whilst there is an increasingly sociological flavour in research and writing about assessment and learning in HE, there is further to go in this direction (Duckworth & Maxwell, 2015; Duckworth, 2016). One further example makes this point very well, namely the Hong Kong University Grants Committee-funded 'learning-oriented assessment project', which took as its starting point the need for HE assessment research to focus less on the traditional 'technical' concerns such as measurement, validity and reliability, and more on issues of judgement and learning (Joughin, 2009). For the most part fascinating and insightful, some contributions to this body of work nevertheless avoid the

relational and cultural dimensions that are so important to how things actually work in practice. We are left wondering how those making judgements are positioned by institutions, systems, roles and relationships that are suffused with power. Surely, both the nature and the meaning of judgements shift if students regard themselves as consumers, or student numbers triple within a few years, or a rising proportion of staff are on temporary contracts, or if managers define the 'professionalism' of teaching staff as limited to doing a job well in accordance with the job specification.

## How Course Teams Can Use a Learning Cultures Perspective

In the research project on FE mentioned earlier, we found some marked differences in what learning was from place to place, in how learning was defined and practiced 'on the ground'. As we moved from one setting to another, the conception of learning changed, sometimes radically. Yet within each setting, it remained more or less the same over time, even though groups of students – and even teachers – came and went. The same is likely to be true of higher education. In some settings learning might be best described as a process of acquiring and memorizing large amounts of information. In others, it might be more akin to participation in a community of practice, or problem-solving in real or simulated working environments, whilst in yet others, practices and outcomes may be more focused (e.g. the achievement of communicative competence, or perhaps criticality, or perhaps a set of skills required for 'enterprise'). These and other characterisations can and do of course exist in combination, and alongside conceptions linked to disciplines and/or inter-disciplinarity. But the point that struck the TLCFE team was that insofar as learning was articulated at all, there was very little of this variety or range in the discourses of institutions, the sector, principal funding bodies or quality inspection bodies. For these, learning was a simpler and more generic concept. Learning resulted (or not) in the achievement of qualifications, which were clearly fixed at a set of levels. It produced (or failed to produce) 'progression'. The 'learning outcomes' of official discourse were very different to the outcomes of learning for students and teachers (James, 2005). The following comment from Coffield was made with reference to further education and lifelong learning policy in 2000, but could just as well sum up the situation for much of contemporary undergraduate higher education some 16 years later:

> In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such a widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous. (Coffield, 2000, p. 18)

Here, Coffield is pointing to 'what goes without saying', which is a primary concern of many social scientists, and a good example of what Bourdieu meant by

*doxa*. Despite the sheer variety in both practices and theories of teaching and learning, in most of higher education these things are only rarely articulated. In all likelihood, this allows 'default' common-sense assumptions about learning and teaching to shape the learning culture, just as they shaped much of the physical architecture and furniture of the spaces and environments in which we teach and learn. What can the social science teacher and her or his colleagues do about this?

One answer is to make sure that the critical role of social science itself, in making apparent the normally hidden structures and interests of the status quo, is applied 'inside' as well as 'outside' the course. For example, although a regular feature of a learning culture is a strong internal view of the nature of learning, this may never be articulated and shared, and still less declared and defended. Achieving this articulation and sharing may sound like a straightforward task, but it is actually an extremely demanding one in a sector that is long-accustomed to defining what it does through disciplinary (and even, inter-disciplinary) categories. Furthermore, some parts of some higher education institutions have what might be termed a highly individualized culture, and this will make joint pedagogic deliberation very difficult. Nevertheless, many course or programme teams do work together, and if they can, it may be possible for them to use a learning cultures perspective as a tool for collective self-examination, so as to work out what is shared and valued, what is mutable, or what is to be strengthened and defended. In the paper mentioned earlier, there are 10 suggested questions designed to help course teams to do this. The questions are as follows:

1. 'What concepts of learning, development and measurement are woven into current documents and practices, and are these articulated or justified, or presented as self-evidently how things are and have to be?
2. What concepts of knowledge or capacity seem to be encapsulated in documents and practices?
3. What methods and practices of assessment are present, and which are prevalent? By what processes did these specific assessment practices come to be part of the course or programme?
4. Who are the main internal and external stakeholders with regard to the curriculum and pedagogy, and how do they articulate and monitor their interests? Are declarations of such interest internally consistent? Are there tensions between different sets of interests, either within the institution or across its borders?
5. Who was involved in constructing and articulating the identity, 'vision' or core purposes of the course and its assessment? To what extent do current staff feel a sense of ownership?
6. How are the main goals or core purposes expressed? Are there important goals amongst staff and students that are not captured by the official accounts of the provision?
7. How is the course, the department, the institution *positioned* in the field of higher education, nationally and internationally? In particular, is the course held by some to be superior or inferior to other similar provision in other places?

8. Are there patterns in the composition of the student body and the staff members in terms of background, ethnicity, gender, schooling, social class and so forth?
9. What sort of social and cultural capital characterise the staff, and does this link to their legitimacy in the eyes of students, colleagues and other stakeholders?
10. Which elements of the learning culture are in tension or conflict, and which can easily co-exist or are in harmony?' (James, 2014, pp. 165–166)

## Related Forms of Sociological Imagination

Earlier there was mention of an interactionist perspective, which I would describe as important but quite rare in work examining HE teaching, learning and assessment. The well-known example is by Becker and his colleagues (1968) whose study of life in a university in Kansas included an analysis of subjective meanings about assessment. For example, Becker and his colleagues found that the awarding and receiving of grades was a collective as much as an individual affair, and that groups of students and staff held generally different views when it came to the meaning of grades. For staff, a grade reflected both student ability and how much effort had been put in to a task, whilst for students, grades were valid if they reflected the amount of effort expended. This is an important insight if we are interested in teaching, learning, assessment and feedback. The study, like some other work in the interactionist and interpretive traditions, can be criticised for a lack of attention to issues of power and social structure, or to the dispositional elements in play. Nevertheless, it may provide pointers for investigating with students their own current situation, bringing together their own experiences of assessment with a study that is such a good example of a well-known and important sociological perspective.

The generation of new insight by bringing together (in a sense) students from 1960s USA and a contemporary course in (say) a UK university is in keeping with one of the most fundamental ideas in the literature on creativity, namely Koestler's *bisociation* (Koestler, 1969). Koestler illustrates in a convincing way (via such figures as Archimedes, Pasteur, Kepler and Darwin) that the process of creativity is fundamentally the discovery of what was already there through the fresh combination of two or more existing frames of reference. In doing so, he also illustrates the similarities of process across the most creative acts in the fields of comedy, art and science. Put crudely, a good joke and the discovery of Penicillin have a lot in common. Koestler's illustration is as follows:

Two women meet whilst shopping at the supermarket in the Bronx. One looks cheerful, the other looks depressed. The cheerful one inquires:

'*What's eating you?*'

*'Nothing's eating me'*.

*'Death in the family?'*

*'No, God forbid!'*

*'Worried about money?'*

*'No…nothing like that'.*

*'Trouble with the kids?'*

*'Well, if you must know, it's my little Jimmy'*

*'What's wrong with him, then?'*

*'Nothing is wrong. His teacher said he must see a psychiatrist'*

Pause. *'Well, what's wrong with seeing a psychiatrist?'*

*'Nothing is wrong. The psychiatrist said he's got an Oedipus complex'*

Pause. *'Well, well, Oedipus or Schmoedipus, I wouldn't worry so long as he's a good boy and loves his mamma'.* (Koestler, 1969, pp. 32–33)

The joke works because a line of thinking is built up, then ambushed from the side, and we are given a glimpse of two very different mother/son relationships. It is precisely this juxtaposition that makes us sit up, take note, laugh, cry, be amused, entertained, horrified, moved, know afresh, form new perspectives. This concept of creativity is close to many of the more interesting ideas about learning (not least the notions of 'Gestalt' or 'Ah Ha') which involve the association and resonance between two or more previously unconnected ideas or frames of reference. Arguably, creative social science teachers know and act upon this, perhaps intuitively. Especially in introductory courses or modules, there is enormous scope for 'ambush' in social science teaching if the right kind of material can be found.

One example of such teaching was triggered by the opening of a new low-price clothing store (Primark) in my home-town of Bristol in the UK. There had been an energetic publicity campaign, and on the first day when the new store opened, there were queues of people outside from very early in the morning, waiting for their chance to buy things. Soon there was also a small protest opposite, organised by the anti-poverty charity *War on Want*, designed to raise awareness of why it was that the clothes on sale were so cheap. The posters held up by the protestors detailed the poor working conditions of some of those people in countries far away who were part of the supply chain. Soon after that, the police arrived, with video cameras, to keep an eye on the protest, and the news media arrived to record the event for the television news.

The whole of the above episode was then used by a teacher of sociology in first-year undergraduate modules on work and globalization. Some of the students had bought clothes at Primark stores, and the teacher concentrated on this for some time, exploring in a carefully non-judgemental climate the relatively familiar aspects of shopping for clothes, before introducing a series of activities that would result in many new connections being made. By the end of several sessions, the students had considered and theorized, supported by selected reading, issues that included: the economies of the supplying countries; the pay and conditions of the workers making the clothes and how and why these differ from place to place; the

ownership of the companies involved and where the wealth generated would end up; the costs of transporting the goods from place of production to various retail outlets; the reasons that shoppers were so keen; why it was that the protesters (and not the shoppers) were the subject of police attention; why the police recorded the protestors on film, and on whose authority; how the costs of the policing would be met; the extent to which the police, the media, the company running the shop and the other actors were democratically accountable; the nature of the news media coverage and whether it constructed any of the parties as 'normal' in their actions; where the cameras used by the police and media personnel were made, and how much they cost. The teacher was clearly using the episode in a creative way, making her own new connections but also enabling students to do something similar by bringing together the very familiar with a series of unfamiliar elements that are so closely connected to it.

This example illustrates how a relatively simple concept of creativity can feed the development of a sociological imagination. Interestingly, the approach is much more than just choosing good content and more than just devising a clever way to deliver content or being 'student-centred'. It is, rather, both a substantive and a pedagogic strategy rolled into one. As much as anything it speaks of the teacher's passion and commitment (rooted in her own history which had included direct experience of multinational corporations, and experience as an adult educator influenced by Paulo Friere, Stephen Brookfield and Jean Anyon). Most mainstream pedagogic discourse would separate the 'how to teach' from the 'what to teach', but tellingly, that distinction breaks down in the example. Furthermore, the teacher in question saw it as a necessity rather than a choice to engage her students with these issues. Arguably, in a period characterised by increasing social inequalities, increased poverty, financial meltdowns, recession, banking fraud and corporate greed, politicians' expenses scandals and astonishing levels of corporate tax avoidance, we have a duty to our students (as learners and as fellow citizens) to nurture an energetic exploration and a critical appreciation of these facets of contemporary society. Not to do so could be deemed as negligent, anti-democratic or irresponsible.

There are of course a great many other potential sources that can inspire various forms of sociological imagination that can then nurture and inspire teaching and learning. Perhaps the most obvious one would be the book that coined the phrase itself, namely Mills' (1959) work *The Sociological Imagination*. I would also recommend Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) and several of Norman Denzin's books. Each of these can provide inspiration for how to explore the intersection of public issues and private troubles. However, for those teaching in higher education, there are more recent works with a sociological focus on social practices in that sector. The capabilities approach, with its theoretical roots with Sen and Nussbaum, has generated a range of analyses that offer both critique of current practices and pointers towards a less narrowly constrained vision for higher education. A recent edited collection (Boni & Walker, 2013) is particularly good for its range of applications, some of which augment the

capabilities approach with other theorists (such as Bernstein). One of the most engaging and insightful accounts of the higher education field in recent years is a book from North America, entitled *Access to Inequality: Reconsidering Class, Knowledge and Capital in Higher Education* by Amy Stich (2012). This brings us back to Bourdieu, various of whose tools are used here to great effect. Stich presents a painstaking account of the social positioning of her case-study institution in the field of higher education and its effects:

> McKinley College's democratized position within the larger system of higher education and its working-class reputation translates into a damaging discursive practice and a corresponding hierarchy of class-based knowledge. (p. 9)

This position in the field is related to the intricate and protracted making of dispositions for students and staff. Stich describes:

> …reputational *affects* (which) cannot be located through the more common calculation of reputation *effects*. Rather, reputation *affects* are the deeply felt, socially constructed components of everyday life – they are the more sticky residues left behind by constancy of reputation than reputation itself – the stuff that leaves a lasting mark and won't wash clean or easily shake free…this research not only seeks to identify the more tangible effects of reputation, but also the quantifiable *affects* accumulated through attending a less-prestigious university. (p. 30)

This deeply sociological account achieves something very similar to the learning cultures approach introduced earlier in this chapter, namely to provide an analysis that keeps structure and agency in view, that treats social practice as the dynamic intersection of dispositions and fields. Stich's concepts of 'reputation' and 'affect' are very close to our use of 'learning culture' (James & Biesta, 2007). Stich also argues forcefully that those working in higher education need to be educated about the inequities that may flow from their current work. She is adamant that further expansion of higher education would produce even greater inequality, given the power of the differentiating mechanisms she has closely studied.

In presenting an analysis of crucial features of contemporary higher education, both of these sources (Boni & Walker, 2013; Stich, 2012) offer exciting scope for teaching with a sociological imagination. As forthright as they are insightful, they may provide a particularly powerful means to enable and promote serious reflexivity amongst current students.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to argue that in the context of higher education teaching and learning, and especially in the social sciences themselves, a sociological imagination is vital. It has set out some suggestions about how higher education teachers (or groups of them) might make use of a learning cultures

approach, amongst other related approaches, in order to nurture this sociological imagination.

It's worth reminding ourselves of why this matters so much. It seems to me that there are three main reasons. Firstly, there is what we might term a troubling affinity between on the one hand a widespread common-sense world-view that celebrates the primacy of the individual in all things, and on the other hand the idea that the nature and quality of teaching, learning and assessment is completely dependent (or very nearly so) on the capacities and preferences of the individual teacher. Of course, the qualities and capacities of individual teachers are of great importance, but this does not mean that these qualities and capacities are the only vehicle for understanding and even changing what happens in educational settings. Having a sociological imagination in the area of teaching and learning is not a recipe for a 'quiet life': it involves wrestling with the ideas that have become dominant in educational institutions, and these tend to have their anchorage in technical, managerial or psychological concepts. Part of a sociological imagination is to do with a distinctive unit of analysis, at the level of the social, which is at odds with most dominant ideas in educational institutions (see James, 2015).

Secondly, a wealth of sociological insight shows us the immense power of educational processes to take social differences and turn them into something more individualised, with all the appearance of a natural process. A teacher with no awareness of this is a dangerous individual, in charge of processes that look innocent enough but which have the power to confirm, disconfirm and restructure student dispositions. The usual objection to this idea is the technicist one, that is the pretence that teaching and learning are only really concerned with the transfer of information or knowledge. Yet most personal experiences of schooling directly contest this view, underlining the significance of relationships and identifications with teachers in facilitating the most successful learning.

Thirdly, and finally, a sociological imagination is the key to a form of critical or meta-thinking, in which we enable ourselves and our students to be reflexive in the deep Bourdieusian sense, and in which we take every opportunity to bring together the very familiar with the strange (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu talked about the importance and the difficulty of achieving what he termed 'thinking the social world', arguing that it was made especially challenging by the way that existing social arrangements present themselves as 'the preconstructed…inscribed both in things and in minds' and 'under the cloak of the self-evident which goes unnoticed because it is by definition taken for granted'. Bourdieu went on to describe what was needed to break out of this:

> Rupture in fact demands a *conversion of one's gaze* and one can say of the teaching of sociology that it must first 'give new eyes'…The task is to produce, if not a 'new person', then at least a new gaze…and this cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a *metanoia*, a mental revolution, a transformation of one's whole vision of the social world'. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 251. Original emphasis)

This seems to me to be an excellent reminder of the responsibility we have as teachers of social science to engage in 'creative subversion'.

## Suggested Discussion Points

Thinking about an institutional setting that you know well (school, college, university, for example):

1. What range of activities are conventionally regarded as teaching and learning, and why those?
2. What concept(s) and practices of learning are fostered by the way that learners are assessed?
3. Are programmes of study divided into 'levels'? If so, how are these levels differentiated?
   And finally:
4. If you teach, are you creative? Does 'bisociation' feature in your own practice?

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# Chapter 4
# Breaking the Silence: Critical Race Theory in Pedagogy and Practice

**Mark Webb and Caroline Ukoumunne**

**Abstract** The purpose of this chapter is to consider the ways in which Critical Race Theory in Practice, a unique undergraduate-level module centring on race and racism can be inflected with postcolonial theory to open possibilities for the development of creative, inclusive and transgressive pedagogical spaces. We contend that in discussions of neo liberalism in education both critics and proponents of neo liberalism fail to fully apprehend the ways in which this ideological worldview, in its global impact and effects, displays racial characteristics that profoundly impact and entrench racial inequality. Therefore, the chapter will consider how 'race' and 'racisms' can be re-examined in Higher Education by racialising neo liberalism and methodology in order to develop a liberatory pedagogy. The chapter will end by discussing the CRTP Eye of Discourse practice model, developed for teaching in a range of global and postcolonial contexts providing opportunities to transform the complexity of counter-hegemonic theoretical knowledge into pedagogical practices.

## Introduction

> *Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.* (Martin Luther King)

Our theoretical and practice-based approach to uncovering silence and enjoining the relevance of students' lived experiences in our work has drawn on an exposition of Critical Race Theory (CRT) inflected with postcolonial theory. The reason for adopting this approach is based on the need to indigenise CRT in order to reflect the geo-political context of British students in a London-based University. The precedents for this approach can be seen in the many

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off-shoots of CRT in the United States that include Asian CRT and Latino/Latina CRT. These approaches are essential in preventing the homogenization of racialised[1] groups and reflect an acknowledgement of multiple racial histories which allow for the bringing into view of a broader array of issues than those pertaining to African-Americans.

CRT was initially developed in the United States by scholars in the 1980s as a response to the failure of Civil Rights laws to deliver the anticipated desire and hope by people of colour for racial equality (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT is an off-shoot of the work of Critical Legal Studies that sought to examine the differential treatment of subordinated groups and people of colour in the American legal system. As a theoretical paradigm CRT relies on a transdisciplinary approach borrowing from existing theoretical perspectives including Critical Theory, black feminist theory, Marxist and postcolonial theory. Significantly, CRT draws heavily on Critical Theory which informs its social justice agenda and is informed by Marxist theoretical notions of critical and transformatory pedagogy, of particular interest is Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' Bourdieu, 1986. Additionally, CRT blurs the boundaries between theory and practice in the academic institution by drawing on activist theories 'from below', as they are/were manifested in black political activism by black feminists, anti-colonialists, black liberationists and civil rights activists.

The fusion of activism and theory in CRT forms an epistemological apparatus and departure point for understanding the effects of race and racism in society. With respect to its role in Higher Education, there are three key tenets of CRT that are essential to producing critical pedagogical approaches to curriculum design:

1. There is an emphasis on the significance of the experiential knowledge of subjugated peoples and a clear focus is placed on the centrality of the voices of subjugated peoples. This is considered to be indispensable to struggles against racism.
2. There is an acknowledgement that reality is socially constructed and the racialised operations of power in white-dominated societies highlights the privileging of white/Eurocentric perspectives which occlude and marginalise the voices of subjugated groups. This theoretical insight creates the groundwork for shifting racism from the private to the public sphere.
3. Racism, critical race theorists argue, cannot simply be written off as a matter of individual prejudice at best, or free speech at worst. Rather racism is a structuring principle in society that is inflected in social, political, economic and cultural matrices.

CRT critiques the longstanding academic claims of Cartesian subjectivity, apolitical scholarship and objective neutrality. Williams (1993), the renowned Critical

[1]Our practice assumes that all individuals have a racial or ethnic identity. We follow on from race theorists who have stated that white people also have 'racialised' identities (see Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Ruth, 1998). To this end we use the term racialised 'Other' to denote the complex positionality of racial identities in relationship to matrices of power. This enables a theoretical approach to understanding how whiteness is inflected in relationship to class, disability/ability, gender, sexuality and other aspects of identity.

Race Theorist, critiques legal practice in a form that is equally applicable to academic discourse when she makes the powerful intervention that Eurocentric epistemological perspectives create an 'essentialised world view (in which there is) a worrisome tendency to disparage anything that is nontranscendent (temporal, historical), or contextual (socially constructed or nonuniversal (specific)) as 'emotional', 'literary', 'personal', or just Not True' (1993, p. 9). CRT thus draws attention to practices that are infused with hegemonic assumptions and which work hard to discredit or marginalise alternative perspectives.

In terms of its methodology there are a number of conceptual tools and methods that are employed by CRT theorists. The ones that concern us here are (1) counter-storytelling; (2) the critique of colour-blind and race-neutral theories, practices and social policy; (3) an examination of whiteness; and (4) an emphasis on historical and social analysis.

These tools provide and invigorate theoretical analyses of race and racisms, although CRT has not been taken up widely in British academia. There is some work and research mainly in the field of the sociology of education that uses Critically Race Theory as a model, but for the most part CRT is a relatively new and emergent field and in its British manifestation it relies very heavily on scholarship and theories that emanate from the United States (Gillborn, 2005; 2008; Hylton, Pilkington, Warmington, & Housee, 2011). The problems inherent in transposing CRT to the United Kingdom are complex; CRT emerged from the context of African-American history and experience. Thus there is a danger that African-American subjectivity is assumed to be normative and representative of diasporic black identity. The complex composition of Britain's immigrant populations and their descendants in the UK is profoundly bound up with the effects of 400 years of Britain's role in the slave trade and subsequently in colonial and imperial conquest. These experiences need to be perceived through the prism of nuanced socio-political contexts. Leading on from this, racial inequality in the UK is closely aligned to socio-economic disadvantage and as a consequence, there is a huge overlap in the experiences of economically disadvantaged people and non-whites.

We therefore contend that all forms of knowledge regarding 'race' and racisms[2] must be indigenised in order to speak to and more accurately reflect the geographical context and experiences of students in the UK. Further, this requires the creation of new knowledges and theories to inflect new pedagogical approaches to assist in students' ability to engage and reflect on their own histories as a precondition to locating their authentic voices. For this reason we have developed a course in CRT and Practice that draws on the conceptual and methodological tools of CRT and is structured with postcolonial theoretical, critical and methodological and conceptual approaches.

Postcolonialism and the inter-related fields of postcolonial studies, postcolonial theory and postcolonial criticism are complex to define. This complexity is further

[2]We use the term racisms in this chapter to denote the existence of particular types of racism that are directed to specific groups. Racism against African-Caribbeans differs markedly to anti-Muslim racism both types of racism are products of unique histories and manifest themselves differently in relation to the targeted group.

complicated by the fact that the terms are frequently used interchangeably by theorists, many of whom acknowledge multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings of the terms (Appiah, 1992; Loomba, 1998, p. 7; McClintock, 1994; Williams & Chrisman, 1993, p. 5; Young, 2003, pp. 6–7). Young (2001) notes that postcolonial theory is a relatively new theoretical intervention in Western academia and is a syncretic body of knowledge that draws on a range of disciplines and theoretical agendas including Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, feminism, history, human geography, Marxism, philosophy and sociology (p. 67).

This rich heritage is also underpinned by a nod to the foundations of anti-colonial thought as explicated in the work of anti-colonial theorists, activists and writers including Chairman Mao, Mahatma Ghandi, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon and Ho Chi Minh and Nnamdi Azikiwe (Quayson, 2000; Young, 2001). Western-influenced postcolonial theory has dominated the field of postcolonial studies; however, the foundations of this theoretical work owe a profound debt to the activism, political work and theoretical interventions of the individuals named above. By bringing anti-colonial theory back into view, it is possible to broaden the notion of 'theory' as it is narrowly defined in Western academia to include the actions undertaken by colonised and postcolonial peoples that have sought to contest oppression and domination and articulated alternative visions and versions of liberation. Central to these visions is a conceptualisation of explicating hidden histories and the intergenerational trauma experienced by the descendants of colonised peoples, bringing into play subjectivities 'from below'.

The conceptual tools and methods of postcolonial theory and criticism are shaped by the fields in which they are located. For our purposes we articulate postcolonial theory and methodology within the context of Cultural Studies and Literary Studies approaches to exploring modes of representation of the racialised 'Other' whilst using colonial discourse analysis (Said, 1978) to examine how European history, culture and knowledge have shaped the contemporary world. This opens up spaces for considering the impact of the aftermath of colonialism and the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have impacted the lives of racial minorities in the West. This inflection of postcolonialism is particularly relevant not only to understanding the lives of minority ethnic peoples in the United Kingdom (and other parts of the globe), as Quayson (2000, p. 2) suggests. Further, an understanding of the ways in which colonialism and imperialism restructured all aspects of knowledge in the colonial encounter can be traced back to examine the impact on epistemology in the imperial centres and the concordant effect on the shaping of gender, class and sexuality.

It is also necessary to foreground our stance on the relationship between practice and theory. Trifonas reminds us in *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Instituting Education and the Discourse of Theory* that:

> any engagement or identification with a theoretical position or direction (for instance, a theorem, a system, a methodology, a 'proof', an ideology, an argument) implies the critical outworking of an academic responsibility to uphold an obligation owed to the search for truth at all costs. This is what makes theory practice and provides a justifying principle, a principle of reason for what we think, do, and write. (Trifonas, 2000, p. XI)

## Breaking Silences: Racialising Neoliberalism

*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free*. (Nina Simone)

In seeking to understand the relationship between social sciences and the study of race it is important to set our exegesis within the wider task of racialising neoliberalism. British scholarship in the social sciences has failed to address the ways in which neoliberalism, as a political and economic concept and a producer of social relations, articulates new conceptions of race. There is a recognition of the impact of the pressures on academics and the reshaping of academic work in the context of the marketization of education particularly in relationship to increased administration and bureaucracy. However, far less attention is paid to the ways in which neoliberalism impacts upon the curriculum in terms of epistemological approaches to the construction of knowledge and the silencing of counter-hegemonic, racialised voices. In this section, we begin by sketching out the conceptual complexities inherent in the relationship between neoliberalism and race.

Neoliberal economic and political processes make an implicit claim to colourblindness whilst simultaneously entrenching racialised inequalities. Fukuyama (1989) has speculated about the inability of the US government to deliver racial justice in the post-Civil Rights era that

> the root causes of economic inequality do not have to do with the underlying legal and social structure of our society, which remains fundamentally egalitarian and moderately redistributionist, so much as with the cultural and social characteristics of the groups that make it up, which are in turn the historical legacy of premodern conditions. Thus black poverty in the United States is not the inherent product of liberalism, but is rather the 'legacy of slavery and racism' which persisted long after the formal abolition of slavery. (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 8)

Concomitantly and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, neo-liberal philosophy posits that the modern autonomous subject should be divorced from prior histories of exclusion and discrimination and these should have no bearing on their ability to 'get on their bike' and find a job or 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps'. Thus the only barrier to an individuals' potential social mobility is their willingness and ability to work hard. In some ways we find ourselves in a repeating cycle of the concentric circle in which a to-and-fro between class and race operates as sociological explanations for racial inequality and differential outcomes.

Angela Davis[3] has theorised persuasively that under the current economic and political conditions neoliberal colourblindness and the attempts to marginalise histories of racial injustice and oppression by negating the historical impact of racism does not mean that racism ceases to exist, rather, 'racism clandestinely structures prevailing institutions, practices and ideologies in this era of neoliberalism' (2012, p. 168). Loomba (1998) engages a cogent critique of Fukuyama's premise when she intones that: 'race relations are not determined by economic distinctions alone,

[3]Davis (2013).

rather economic disparities are maintained by ideologies of race'. She states further that:

> A dialectical perspective helps us to understand not just colonial history but the postcolonial world as well. The race relations that are put into place during colonialism survive long after many of the economic structures underlying them have changed. The devaluation of African slaves still haunts their descendants in metropolitan societies, the inequities of colonial rule still structure wages and opportunities for migrants from once colonised countries or communities, the racial stereotypes … and contemporary global imbalances are built upon those inequities that were consolidated during the colonial era. A complex amalgam of economic and racial factors operates in anchoring the present to the colonial past. (Loomba, 1998, p. 129)

Loomba advances the intellectual discussion by rejecting the 'splitting off' of the past from the present and by implication of the future. Her theoretical insight makes an epistemological and pedagogical intervention that draws attention to the ways in which race and neoliberalism are indivisible and are in fact coconstitutive of each other.

Roberts and Mahtani in exploring the relevance of racialising neoliberalism in the field of geography suggest that 'only including race in analyses that focus on neoliberalization actually limits the understanding of the way that neoliberalism is thoroughly imbued with race (2010, p. 1). They continue in relationship to academic research that scholarship needs to recognise the ways in which neoliberalism 'is fundamentally raced and produces racialized bodies' (2010, p. 1). And herein lies the rub; the erasure of racism and its marginalisation in British academic institutions under various equality and diversity policies cannot disguise the fact that there continue to be racialised outcomes in Higher Education.

The racialization of bodies under neoliberalism has two effects in British universities. Firstly, it becomes difficult to talk about race or racism without invoking a sense of pre-modern, essentialised biological identities that are simply, as Patricia Williams suggests, 'Not True' (1993, p. 9). Secondly, the racialization of non-white bodies obscures the ways in which white bodies are also racialised both as elite whites who are producers of knowledge and in charge of the mechanics of knowledge production and also as subjugated whites who are under-represented as undergraduate students. Thus, making whiteness visible entails a recognition of the ways in which elite whites make working class whites visible only as *classed* subjects and non-whites visible only as *raced* subjects.

We depart from the traditional theoretical framework of CRT in the United States and argue that the colonising process that emerged from within the metropolitan centre impacts as profoundly on working class white people as it does on non-whites. Foucault (1990) has explained the 'return effect' of colonial discourse and practice which he describes as 'techniques and juridical and political weapons' designed for the colonies but returned to the West to perfect the 'internal colonisation of indigenous peoples' (1990, p. 78). The limited academic and historically archived material in this area is a result of the aporia surrounding our colonial histories. We suggest though, that pursuing this theoretical proposition opens up pedagogical spaces for examining the differential colonial racialisation of

subjugated white people. To be clear, the purpose is not to suggest an aracial or post-racial humanism as proposed by Gilroy (2004); rather we are concerned to use critical pedagogical approaches to explore the complexities of the imbrications of race, class and gender in the lives of subjugated groups.

## Breaking Silences: The Master's Tools Cannot Dismantle the Master's House

This quote above from a paper by the renowned African-American lesbian academic, philosopher and poet given at an academic feminist conference portrays a revolutionary intent in examining and understanding the complexity of using dominant ideological pedagogical approaches and epistemologies to critique and undo systems and structures that militate against social justice and which perpetuate processes and practices of oppression. Audre Lorde questioned:

> What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable (Lorde, 1984, pp. 110–111).

This quote can be used as a starting point to highlight the ways in which dominant pedagogical approaches have structured teaching and curriculum construction in Higher Education within the UK. As Lorde notes, the application of hegemonic pedagogical tools and methods to resolve inequality and oppression and to achieve social justice are likely to be limited in their success because oppositional approaches and interventions are of necessity, only conceivable within existing structures and must defer to the concomitant operations of power within educational systems.

The issues that Lorde raises are of particular significance to understanding how we approach pedagogy and curriculum in the era of neoliberal education. Of particular interest is the context in the UK in which these interventions take place. One of the most under-recognised aspects of neoliberalism in Higher Education in the UK has been the effect of 'widening participation' policies and the drive to widen access to Higher Education for previously under-represented groups. Widening participation was initially couched within New Labour's 'Third Way' approach to transforming government institutions by marrying marketisation and economic development to broadly socialist democratic ideals of social inclusion and the promotion of social justice. It is not necessarily coincidental that the implementation of widening participation policies emerged at a time of a serious funding crisis in U.K. Higher Education and a falling birth rate, which diminished the number of available students who were eligible to attend university.

Widening participation policies have had a significant effect on widening access to Higher Education for young people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the past 20 years. In 1994, ethnic minority students

constituted approximately 12% of students in Higher Education[4] in 2015, BME home-domiciled students made up 20% of U.K. Higher Education students and 23.6% of first year first degree students. In numerical terms, BME students in the UK constitute, together with overseas foreign students from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa, almost 25% of university students in the UK. This is a figure that far exceeds the percentage of BME people in the population which stands at approximately 8%.[5] (It should be noted that BME groups are significantly younger than the indigenous population and this may explain to some degree the larger numbers of young BME people.)

These figures speak to the partial success of widening participation to education for *some* BME young people. However, the figures conceal profound levels of continuing inequality in terms of the lower academic attainment of BME students, their higher drop-out rates from university (that presently stand at 50% for university entrants), higher unemployment rates and lower salaries among graduates. Further, BME students are overly represented in the post-1992, former polytechnic sector and highly under-represented at the more prestigious Russell Group universities.[6] In addition, the relative over-representation and focus of policy on BME groups has masked, until relatively recently, the largely unrecognised phenomenon of the exceptionally low participation rates of white working class young men and women in Higher Education. It is not possible to find precise data on white working class young people in Higher Education as the categories for assessing access focus either exclusively on race or socio-economic status, but do not tally class, race and gender. Data indicates that approximately 86%[7] of students in the leading Russell group universities are white, which suggests that there is in effect a two-tier higher education system in the UK driven by an academic apartheid and de facto segregation by race, class and gender. We have to consider, then, whether the majority of BME students have been invited to engage in a widening participation process that offers them the path to a lesser degree.

Thus, neoliberal philosophy and economic practice and the effects of globalization on the education system from primary school to university level in the UK has had both negative and positive effects in terms of enabling educational opportunities for under-represented groups. However, the policy focus on representation that is embedded in widening participation praxis and its seeming success in relationship to some groups such as, for example, African and Caribbean women, has sidelined and marginalised a consideration of how the presence of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic students in a seminar room should impact upon a thoroughgoing review of the curriculum. At stake is a necessity to engage an examination and

[4]See Connor, Tyers, Modood, & Hillage. (2004).

[5]See HESA (2016) Table 13 – U.K. domiciled H.E students by level of study, sex, mode of study, first year identifier ethnicity 2014/2015. Retrieved from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis.

[6]Alexander & Arday (2015).

[7]Sellgren (2010).‘’

critique of dominant modes of knowledge, the impact of neoliberalism as a hegemonic philosophy within academic institutions and the ways in which particular forms of pedagogical practice are developed within institutional structures to uphold (not necessarily consciously), and reinforce, particular operations of power in academic institutions.

Further, the major expansion of Higher Education precipitated by the Blair Government under the guise of neoliberal multiculturalism and social mobility heralded under the mantra 'education, education, education' has not been matched by equality of opportunity for BME graduates on completion of their degrees. This indicates, firstly, that equality of educational opportunity is not a guarantee of equality of outcome and, secondly, that the assumption of the equality of diverse cultural groups conceals the reality of profound social and economic inequality in society. For these reasons, questions must be asked with regard to the role and function of Higher Education in facilitating social justice agendas, and ultimately, social transformation.

Carlos Torres (2002) has posited that:

> Concerns about equity, accessibility, autonomy or the contribution of higher education to social transformation, which were prevalent during previous decades, have been overshadowed by concerns about excellence, efficiency, expenditures and rates of return. The notion that higher education is primarily a citizen's right and a social investment – which has been taken for granted for many decades – is being seriously challenged by a neoliberal agenda that places extreme faith in the market. (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002, p. 429)

Montero-Sieburth in her foreword to the edited text *Revolutionizing Pedagogy: Education for Social Justice and Beyond Global Neo-Liberalism* (2010) has outlined the implications for pedagogy in education and argues that a return to the notion of *critical pedagogy* in the teachings and philosophy of Paolo Freire can enable practitioners to focus on the outcomes of education into the future whilst utilising Freire's early recognition of the influence of neoliberalism on education. Sieburth makes an important intervention in shifting the practice of pedagogy from practitioners/academics to students. She proposes that a fundamental practice in transformatory and critical pedagogy should be predicated on enabling students to develop their inherent capacity as creators of knowledge as a basis for achieving social justice. The bedrock of this approach and the responsibility of practitioners is to uphold and facilitate students' understanding of the need for: '(1) the right to have voice, (2) the duty to be critical in having voice and (3) becoming critical in experiencing voice'.

She continues:

> These are the basic tenets of a truly democratic society, yet through appropriation of a marketplace ideology that makes labor highly competitive, focus on problem-solving and not problematizing, and infusion of neutrality into the current national standards for curriculum, teacher professionalization, certification programs, and educational reform, these rights and duties become 'silenced'. (Sieburth, 2010, p. xii)

As practitioners this should lead us to consider that *what* is taught and by *whom* is just as significant as *how* we teach. What assumptions underline the

disciplinary and pedagogical agendas in Higher Education? Who speaks? Who is spoken for? Who speaks on behalf of whom? Who is silenced?

## Breaking Silences: Britain and Empire

Hall (1978) noted that 'race' and the problems attendant on it are not a product of post-war immigration to Britain; rather 'race' and racism are profoundly embedded in the construction of 'Britishness'. The notion of 'race', Hall informed his reader, 'is in the sugar you stir; it is in the sinews of the famous British 'sweet tooth'; it is in the tea-leaves at the bottom of the next 'British' cuppa (1978, p. 25). The desire to forget or the refusal to remember plays a role in the silencing of the past. What is also at stake is how the desire to forget becomes structurally located within British historiography in relationship to race and racism. Almost without exception, histories of previously colonised peoples and their descendants in Britain are deemed to begin in 1945 and are thus considered to be largely 'post-colonial'. This assumption, which permeates research in the social sciences and other academic disciplines, negates the significance of the pre-colonial histories of colonised peoples and obscures the anti-colonial struggles of colonised peoples in histories concerned with imperialism. These racial narratives assume the incapability and lack of agency of the racialised 'Other' and place the subjugated 'Other' forever in the role of object rather than subject.

Social scientists are by no means the only academics guilty of this silencing of the past. Van Dijk (1992) notes that the location of powerful speaking subjects, including academics, politicians and business magnates, 'play an important role in the reproduction of racism. They are the ones who control or have access to many types of public discourse, have the largest stake in maintaining white group dominance and are usually the most proficient in persuasively formulating their ethnic opinions' (p. 88). This statement enables us to understand the power of public discourse and utterance by elites and how these statements reinforce silences by adopting the defence mechanisms of denial. For example, Gordon Brown the former British Prime Minister seemed unembarrassed to say on a visit to East Africa in 2005, a year prior to Britain's bicentennial commemoration of the abolition of slavery, that 'the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should celebrate much of our past rather than apologize for it'.[8] The colonialist assumptions in this statement abound. There is a continuation of the myth, traduced by Rodney in his seminal text, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), that colonialism and imperialism and to a lesser degree slavery were processes undertaken for altruistic reasons by Europeans. Further, the notion of the 'white man's burden' that is encoded in the statement together with the urge to celebrate the colonial history fails to acknowledge how contemporary

[8]See Milne (2010).

configurations of race and racism are products of these histories. Most significantly, the call to celebrate the past suggests that colonialism is a relic of past, rather than a process that has undergone new and different globalised configurations.

> *Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter*. (Chinua Achebe)

The African proverb above attests more broadly to the silencing of racialised voices in discourses of race and racisms and the impact of the historical legacies of these absences within contemporary culture. The conceptual and methodological tools utilised in breaking silences have become profoundly embedded in emancipatory discourses, theories and liberatory struggles for social justice in academia. Whilst black feminist theory and scholarship in Britain and the United States has made a significant contribution to critiquing hegemonic sociological academic discourse (Collins, 1993, 1998, 2012; hooks, 1992, 1993, 1994a,b, 1995; Mirza, 2009), theorists and theories of race, racisms, anti-racism and anti-discriminatory practice remain quite marginal to British academia and issues of race are frequently an add-on or an infusion of ‘local colour’ in academic curricula and departments. The reasons for this are complex and in some ways lie beyond the scope of this chapter. However, this is not a problem that is unique to the UK. Similar instances of the singular and combined inequality that are produced out of the nexus of race, class and gender can be gleaned from across the globe.[9]

The voices of racialised ‘Others’ have been and are present in the British academy but we must examine the ways in which they have become visible and for what purposes. Shohat (1995) reminds us in terms of postcolonial theory and praxis that:

> Each… academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, for which strategies and in what tones of address. (Shohat, 1995, p. 173)

The presence of racialised Others’ voices in the academy does not, in themselves, guarantee a representative and non-essentialist or even anti-racist approach to theory, pedagogy and praxis. Shohat’s critique brings to the forefront of consideration a fact that is frequently taken for granted; the methods employed and the knowledge produced in academic institutions are coloured literally and figuratively by the traditions inherent in each discipline. In addition, the processes of knowledge production are subject to the commodification of knowledge within the circuits of production and consumption. In this economic model which is exacerbated by the effect of neoliberalism, racialised voices are produced within and inflected by racial capitalism. The voices that are allowed to speak and what they are permitted to say are subject to discursive regulation and the demands of the

[9] See for example Woodson (1933/2000) on the education of African-Americans, Grande (2004) on Native Americans and Smith (1999) on the education of Maoris in New Zealand.

market. In that sense, what is said operates as a converse of what cannot be said. The ways in which the racialised speech/silence dyad plays out within academic institutions must also engage a reflection on the proposition that all speech is located within specific political, social, cultural and institutional contexts. The interconnection between these discursive sites interacts with the geographical location in which speech acts occur. There is thus a danger for subjugated groups that the agentic effects of 'speaking out' may be muted by the context in which particular articulations are located.

For our purposes, our pedagogic interest lies in understanding how the 'lived experiences'[10] of racialised Others as academics and students can contribute to developing models of practice in which students can become co-producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients or consumers of knowledge. Breaking silences in this sense is concerned with considering the ways in which academics can learn to dehegemonize (hooks, 1992, p. 177) their authoritative positions as producers of knowledge in order to assist in the development of new theoretical models and methodological tools.

## Breaking Silences: Racialising Methodology

The CRT Eye of Discourse: From Colonial 'Object 'Status to Anti-Colonial 'Subject'

> *It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not to worship what is known, but to question it.* (Jacob Chanowski)

We contend that students, academics and practitioners alike should embrace this statement with its invocation of dissidence and understand that it is a necessity in creating counter-hegemonic theoretical interventions within teaching and learning processes. Our major challenge here is to transform the complexity of counter-hegemonic theoretical knowledge into pedagogical practices within the context of institutional policies. Put simply, we perceive racialising methodology as a new way of thinking about race, racisms, and representations and anticipate that this must result in new ways of *doing*. As CRT pedagogy theorists and practitioners with a history of developing 'anti-colonial' pedagogical interventions including the BA/MA Black Perspectives Courses within higher education institutions (Webb, 1995, 2001), new creative pedagogical visionary thinking emerges from a certain dissidence to production, representations and knowledges of racialised Others.

Albert Einstein famously described insanity as 'doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'. Within the academy we need to break the

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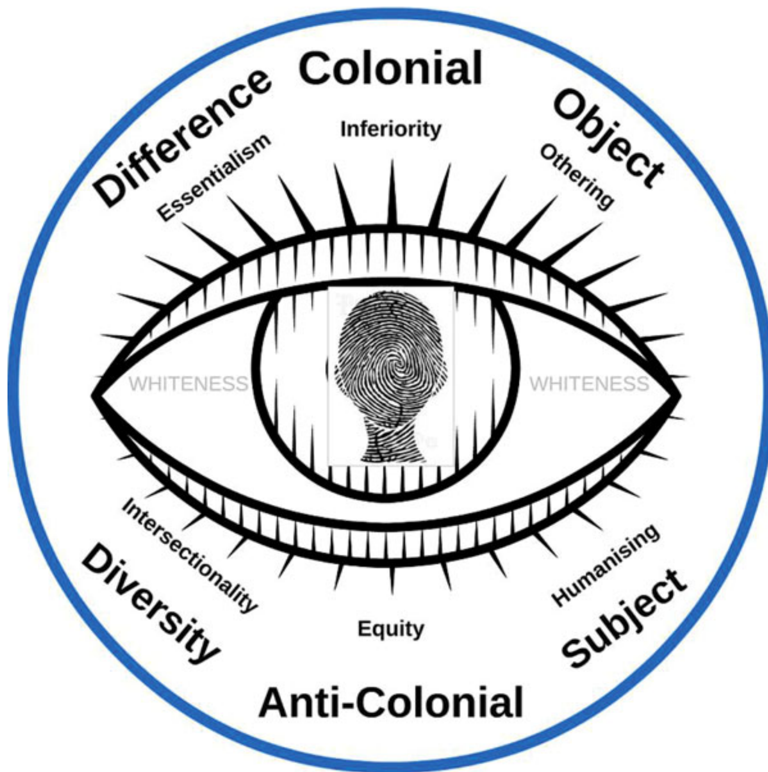
[10]This term is most frequently associated with feminist theory and research and is described as standpoint theory. It refers to the knowledge that marginalised groups have, the use of 'lived experiences' critiques and substitutes the conditions of the social lives of marginalised groups as a source of data instead of positivist epistemology.

perpetual 'colonial' theorising of the complexity of 'racialisation and racisms' cycle at a multiplicity of levels and reflect an 'anti-colonial' approach to pedagogical strategies, institutional policies and practices. Indeed, breaking this cycle and transforming new theories to new practices must involve the breaking of silences about how dominant discourses, particularly those of whiteness, power and privilege, play a role in controlling the creation of new knowledges and subsequently new approaches.

## The CRT-P Eye of Discourse Model




In order to explore new approaches to Social Science theories, methodologies and construction of subjectivity in mainstream pedagogy the CRT and Practice (CRTP) Eye of Discourse model that we have designed offers a new ways of viewing questions of race, racisms and racialisation in the sociology of education and wider sociological and social sciences and humanities disciplinary contexts. As discussed above, processes of racialising neoliberalism and racialising methodology allow for identifying and critiquing silences in the methodological and theoretical assumptions embedded in constructions of racialised Others.

Individually and collectively, these 'racialising components' inform the construction of a lens that seeks to create opportunities for the contestation of dominant colonialist hegemonic thinking. The model seeks to fuse anti-colonial theoretical critique with forms of practice to allow for the emergence of racialised Others' voices within academic discourses. This allows for the creation of alternative pedagogic spaces in which students, academics and educational practitioners can function as co-producers of knowledge. This opens up avenues for understanding how the interrogation of how 'race', and racisms, is critical in uncovering hidden racial analytic categories in the production of knowledge and pedagogical processes.

We use the anti-colonial model to make explicit the ways in which the hegemonic colonialist lens entails a way of viewing the racialised Other that decentres and re-inscribes the student as a passive and voiceless recipient of knowledge and object of academic discourse. The metaphor of the photographic lens is employed to focus attention on the construction of subjectivity in social science discourses that make implicit claims to the production of transcendental knowledge and expertise on racialised Others. Tagg (1998) describes the figuring of the Other in these discourses as:

> 'feminised' objects of knowledge. Subjected to a scrutinising gaze forced to emit signs, yet cut off from command of meanings, such groups (are) represented as, and wishfully rendered, incapable of speaking, acting or organising for themselves. (Tagg, 1998, p. 11)

We have placed the 'eye' in the centre of the camera lens to enable figurative and literal ways to develop oppositional and diverse ways of thinking and seeing. As academics and practitioners working in a London University with a diverse student population[11] we have applied the CRT Eye of Discourse which is reflected in all aspects of pedagogy including programme and course design, student engagement, assessment and student employability. Below, we describe the anti-colonial theoretical and pedagogical approaches encoded in the use of the lens.

## Difference (Essentialism) Colonial (Inferiority) & Object (Othering)

The upper lid of the CRT eye of discourse draws attention to the implicit racial and political bias in mainstream pedagogical approaches and their impact on the objectification of the student. We draw on transgressive pedagogical approaches including those espoused by hooks (1994b) in *Teaching to Transgress* and Grande (2004) in *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. The conception of difference denotes the ways in which the racialised Other is made visible only through essentialised and essentialising categories of age, class,

[11]Key facts University of Greenwich (2014–2015 HESA). Total Students population 21,274; Mode: (FT: 72%), (PT: 28%); Gender: (Male: 44%, Female 56%); Age: (Under 29: 76%), (Over 30: 24%); Ethnicity: (White 50%, Asian other 7%, Bangladeshi 4%, Black African 13%, Black Caribbean, 3%, Black other 1%, Chinese 4%, Indian 6%, Mixed 4%, Pakistani 3%, other 15%, not given 3%).

disability, gender, race, and sexuality. These identities, we argue, are shaped and influenced by colonial notions of inferiority and deficiency that are reflected in mainstream pedagogy. The colonial lens and its colonising assumptions lead to practices that fix racialised Others, in locations of 'dehumanised objectification'. Students, academics and educational practitioners' experiences and identities are produced within the colonial lens as 'racialised Othered representations' and are accommodated only within existing knowledge systems.

The impact of the colonising effects on the racialised Other are not just theoretical, rather the assumed passivity and lack of agency associated with the student Other produces states of subjectification and internalised racism. This state of being has been variously described in anti-colonial activism and postcolonial theory as a 'colonial mentality' or 'mentacide' as such Thiong'o (1981) has stated the need for the colonised to 'decolonise the mind'. In addition, decolonising the mind is a critical process for academics and practitioners who produce and reproduce research and theories that may inadvertently support the assumption of the incapability and intellectual inferiority of the Other.

## Diversity, Decolonisation and Subject

The lower part of the CRTP Eye of Discourse highlights the tools necessary for critical pedagogical interventions. This emphasises the necessity to recognise the complexity and diversity of students' experiences. The CRT methodological approach and tenet, intersectionality, indicates the multiple ways in which students' identities are socially constructed without privileging any single aspect of identity and including age, class, disability, gender and sexuality, whilst keeping in mind how all of these aspects of identity are inflected by race. The purpose of the anti-colonial approach is to enable a humanising of the racialised Other by developing pedagogical methods and tools to enable the emergence of their voices. This creates a pedagogical shift that moves beyond the liberal humanist rejection of notions of the inferiority/deficiency of the Other to search for and examine ways in which *equity*[12] can be achieved.

## Centralising Students

The CRT Eye of Discourse model centralises the uniqueness of the student. This positioning emphasises that students should be central to any learning and teaching process; moreover, all students are unique individuals who happen to be learning in

[12]We make a distinction between equity and equality. Equality as it is currently understood in our social and political context refers almost entirely to representation. This narrow definition of equality occludes and conceals certain forms of discrimination due to the fact that equality of opportunity does not necessarily lead to quality of outcome.

a multiplicity of group settings and contexts. Finally and perhaps more importantly if 'blind spots' do occur within the analytical use of the lens then the point of return must be the centrality of the students' voice. This makes the student an active learner within a complex critical (raced) education process. The identities and 'lived experiences' of all students must be valued when exploring questions of racialisation. As reflected in a guiding principle emerging from HEA Summit findings on improving Black and Minority Ethnic student retention and attainment in which it was suggested that 'students should be viewed as partners in the educational journey and systematically involved in the design and implementation of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment activities' (Stevenson, 2012, p. 19).

## Whiteness

A major principle that underpins CRT and Practice is racialising methodology and interrogating how to break the legacies of 'uncomfortable' silences about race and racism in educational and wider contexts. Through the use of the lens we can begin this process by acknowledging the impact of Eurocentrism and the attendant notion of elite hegemonic whiteness in the dissemination of power as well as the embedding of privilege in the development of curricula and pedagogy. The lens can be used to illustrate how 'colour blindness' about questions of 'race' and racialisation allow 'whiteness' to masquerade as an invisible subjectivity. The 'neoliberal colour blind' approach can be achieved by simply not mentioning or referring to questions of race or racism or by shutting down discussions of race. This is illustrated by the failure of textbooks that are concerned with pedagogy to acknowledge the significance of race and racism in the production of university curricula, see for example Cowan (2006), Race (2005), Thomas and Hixenbaugh (2006) and Toohey (1999). This culture of silence does not simply achieve the effect of marginalising questions of race in the students' academic and lived experiences, it also, by implication, makes the assumption that race and issues attendant on it are insignificant, irrelevant and trivial.

The value and importance of making elite whiteness[13] visible is relevant in how elite groups construct knowledges about racialised Others in academia. These forms of academic colonialism extend across national boundaries and are tightly imbricated with the dissemination of knowledges from ex-colonial centres to their previously colonised peripheries (Mignolo, 1993). To conclude, the Eye of Discourse model seeks to unsettle the binaries inherent in postcolonial pedagogical relations by finding spaces to critique approaches to teaching about race. In a historical period, in which struggles and contestations over identity and nation are likely to become the most significant intellectual questions of our time, we

[13]Contrary to prevailing notions of whiteness as being embodied by white people we follow on from Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks (1967) in arguing that notions of elite whiteness can be internalised by subjugated groups. Hence, the need to 'decolonise the mind.'

propose a transgressive anti-colonial pedagogy as one of the solutions for attaining social justice. As Nelson Mandela taught us:

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. As students, academics and practitioners consider the ways in which the impact of 'whiteness', privilege and associated power can be made visible in your studies, pedagogical approaches and practices.
2. As students, academics and practitioners consider the ways in which the CRT Eye of Discourse model can be used to identify gaps and omissions in your existing curricula.
3. Examine how an understanding of Diversity (intersectionality) Anti-Colonial (ity) (Equity) and Subjectivity from below (humanising) can be applied to enable students; academics and practitioners to become co-producers of knowledge in the academic classroom.

NOTE: To access examples of undergraduate academic work that reflect the practical application of the Critical Race Theory and Practice 'Eye of Discourse' model, see http://crtp.london/moodle.

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# Chapter 5
# Sociology, Inequality and Teaching in Higher Education – A Need to Reorient Our Critical Gaze Closer to Home?

**Tamsin Hinton-Smith**

**Abstract** This chapter argues a particular disciplinary positioning for sociologists in negotiating our professional practice as higher education teachers in the neoliberal academy. It conjectures a need to decompartmentalise the equality-focused vales underpinning the research interests of many sociology academics, from our everyday teaching practices. Understanding of the often-unspoken value-orientation of knowledge including that imparted in HE teaching, and the mechanisms of power and privilege of which we are all part, locate a particular responsibility not only to remain attuned in our own practice but also to take an active role in our institutional cultures. Evidence from research and teaching experience demonstrates the complex interplay of policies, cultures, and both intentional and unintentional dimensions of interactions between individuals and groups in perpetuating prejudice and marginalisation in HE contexts. Evidence of the un-belonging experienced by marginalised minorities including within the university sociology classroom identifies a need for us to reorient our critical gaze closer to home, to the classroom and wider institutional culture as the locus of activity in which so much of our professional lives are spent.

## Introduction

This chapter is not so much about teaching sociology in higher education, as *being* a sociology teacher in higher education. As such it focuses not only on our activity within our departments, but also on our position outside these, as part of our wider institutions and sector as a whole. The discussion draws on experience as a sociology student, alongside later developed research interests around diversity and inequalities in higher education, and most recently, particularly as relate to pedagogic approaches.

Like many academics, perhaps particularly in disciplines like sociology, development of my research interests has been informed by personal experience. Studying sociology at GCSE and A Level, and the enthusiasm of teachers for their

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**Fig. 1** Summer 1996, aged 19, with my daughter in our family flat on campus, at the end of my first year at university

subject, stirred the development of a continuing passion for exploring social issues, particularly around identities and inequalities. At 19 I left temporary council housing and took my 8-month-old daughter with me to begin a BA in sociology, living on campus at a university 300 miles away from family and friends (Fig. 1). It was 1996 and still in the shadow of the not-for-much-longer ruling Conservative party's 'Back to basics' campaign, that had become inextricably linked with an attack on lone parents (*The Independent*, 1993) among other marginalised groups, as the cause of social ills. One of the first term's compulsory sociology lectures was given by one of the most senior and well-known professors in the department. It drew on arguments from contemporary American right-wing commentators including Herrnstein and Murray (1994; Murray, 1999) to argue that lone mothers were responsible for wide-ranging aspects of perceived social degeneration, through the feral children they raised and the rejected partners they apparently left as roaming without responsibilities, causing trouble.

The same Professor was also assigned as my personal tutor, and hence primary contact for both academic and pastoral issues for the duration of the three-year degree. Many years later once I had an academic post, a colleague who had worked in the department when I was a student told me that the Professor had levied a bet when I arrived in the department that I would not complete my degree because of my circumstances. This experience crystallised the extent to which our personally held, underpinning understandings about the world and the qualities of different groups of people in it inform our often unacknowledged assumptions about the thousands of students who move through the classes we teach as academics. These instantaneous judgements that might be based on factors including

ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, sexuality, age, disability, accent, body size or dress, alongside what a student actually tells us about themselves inevitably affect the quality of teaching experience that we offer to different students, and through this the outcomes and returns that they can expect from their financial and time investment in studying at university. Such inequalities resonate with Crozier et al.'s (2008) identification of universities' contrasting expectations of the different students within them, and the ways in which these are delineated by class, ethnicity and gender. This forms part of the nexus by which, despite higher education arguably having become more open over recent decades, many from groups that deviate from notions of the 'ideal student' (Hinton-Smith, 2012a, 2016) remain disadvantaged in their university experiences and outcomes. For less privileged university students this often includes the institutions and courses they enrol in (Purcell, Elias, & Atfield, 2009; Reay, 1998); having to be in paid employment to support themselves financially (Callender, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006); and their degree outcomes in terms of attainment (Connor, Tyers, Modood, & Hillage, 2004) and graduate employment (MacDonald, 2013). Many of the experiences in HE recounted by students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds including working-class and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students can be conceptualised from a Bourdieusian perspective in terms of the constructed habitus of a field from which they remain symbolically excluded despite being physically present (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 1998). As such, the mere counting-in of bodies into HE spaces as captured by widening participation statistics can obscure persistent exclusions experienced by non-traditional students as they move about these physical spaces, negotiating the tacit workings of the symbolic order of the university. This resonates with insights from Pantea's work on Romanian Roma women's migration (2012), identifying that much work on theorising mobilities focuses on outward aspects on terms of geographical and social mobility, often at the expense of acknowledging the inward psycho-social dimension of mobility as we work individually to locate a space of belonging for our identity.

Equality Challenge Unit's (ECU) (2013) recent work on 'unconscious' or 'implicit' bias has importantly asserted and raised awareness of the complexity of processes of discrimination and exclusions in social interactions and the particular relevance of these to higher education contexts. This work has developed disciplinarily from a psychological perspective and as such might be conceived as potentially pulling against accounts advancing a sociological focus on more conscious responsibility for discrimination and inequality in higher education. There remains a pressing need for more in-depth understanding from a sociological perspective of unconscious or unacknowledged dimensions to discriminatory treatment of others. This has particular relevance in terms of the responsibilities of teaching diverse students in higher education. McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin (2015, p. 181) suggest that:

> The acquisition of sociology-based social science knowledge shapes a disciplinary identity that is characterised by thinking in open-minded ways about human behaviour, by questioning the relationship between individuals and the conditions they find themselves in and by being oriented to improving society.

While such broad disciplinary interests may take divergent directions of expression, for many sociologists these are focused around issues of exploring and addressing inequalities in power, resources and reputation. Of course higher education is not the sphere of social activity of primary interest to all academic sociologists, but it is nevertheless where we spend much of our professional lives. I argue that this identified disciplinary orientation conveys an implicit responsibility to actively promote equality of expectations and experience of diverse students in our higher education teaching practice, alongside the theoretical principles espoused in our research.

## Teaching in Higher Education

My own experiences in higher education as deviating from the trajectory of the 'ideal' student fed developing research interests around inclusion, exclusions and marginalisations social institutions including the academy. Ten years after the Professor bet I would not complete my undergraduate studies, I was appointed to a full-time lectureship in the same sociology department. Eight years later, a move to an Education department brought existential anxiety as to whether taking the teacher out of sociology meant taking the sociology out of the teacher. How would I describe myself professionally on my staff webpage and to new acquaintances? Such concern proved unnecessary as in education I met many colleagues who identify as sociologists of education, coming from diverse trajectories not necessarily bearing the disciplinary preoccupations of a conventional sociology training. As one education colleague cheerily replied when I asked whether she had completed her data analysis on a project she was working on – 'yes I've finished my data analysis – whatever that means!'

My role now includes teaching not only students but also my academic colleagues on issues around pedagogy and diversity, as part of responsibility for developing and leading institutional Teaching and Learning staff professional development. This has brought contact with many more colleagues from across diverse disciplines inside and outside my own institution. Engaging in discussions around our roles as higher education teachers has evoked reflection on academic practice and interrogation of personally held assumptions in previously unarticulated ways. This includes awareness of the unacknowledged effects of 20 years disciplinarily located in sociology amongst both students and colleagues with whom broadly similar views are shared, and reading and citing the work of higher education commentators united by broad agreement. This I now realise to have resulted in an unduly optimistic impression of the equality-awareness of the profession as a whole. Instead I have found myself challenged by colleagues who unproblematically assert that UK students understandably would not want to undertake group work with international students because this would inevitably 'drag the UK students' marks down', or questioning whether fostering inclusive HE learning environments for diverse students means 'compromising academic standards'. The purporting of such views is of great

significance given our power as academics to contribute to shaping students' futures through the way we nurture or undermine their self-belief in our interactions with them, assess the standard of their academic work, and the references we write in support of their future studies and employment. This implies the necessity to reflect on both the privileged positioning of sociology's disciplinary association with a motivation to improve society and a professional role that provides the opportunity to do so.

Experiencing inequalities in higher education aligned to aspects of identity is not restricted to any one group, but permeates the everyday life of the academy at many levels. Research has identified and theorised the operationalisation of inequalities in higher education from the 'leaky pipeline' that sees women and minority ethnic groups persistently marginalised from promotional opportunities (Morley, 2013), to the relevance of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) to understanding the need for institutional responsibility in the fostering of more inclusive learning environments accessible by diverse students (Haggis, 2006; Hinton-Smith, 2012a; 2012b). Yet much of the critique of higher education's persistent inequalities circumnavigates the significance of the myriad micro-interactions though which such inequalities are reproduced on a daily basis. This significance of the minutiae of everyday practices in higher education in terms of reproducing power (Morley, 1999) includes the interactions between students and teachers in higher education. Burke and McManus' important 2011 report *Art for a few: Exclusion and Misrecognition in Art and Design Higher Education Admissions* draws on a Bourdieusian framework to explore how higher education art and design tutors' admissions decisions weighed applicants' portfolios against value-laden judgements around 'potential' and 'ability'. The report identified the way in which, particularly in terms of ethnicity and social class, 'subtle inequalities and exclusions might take place despite a commitment to fair and transparent admissions practices' (Burke & McManus, 2011, p. 6). There nevertheless remains a need to further theorise the precise mechanisms by which such inequalities and exclusions are able to persist, carried in the practice of our profession as higher education teachers. This informs a need for sociologists in higher education to turn our critical gaze to developing understandings of mechanisms of inequality in academic life including the unacknowledged and unconscious; by using our disciplinary perspective through both research and critical reflection on professional practice as HE teachers.

Existing research on 'implicit' or 'unconscious' bias has exposed the pervasiveness of unacknowledged prejudice coexisting even with consciously egalitarian principles (ECU, 2013), and advanced recommendations for tackling prejudice through consciously reflecting on our own attitudes and behaviours as individuals (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012). Sociologists and other proponents of socially based accounts of human behaviour may be reluctant to espouse such apparently individual explanations. Acknowledging the operationalisation of unconscious bias however does not undermine recognition of either the managerial power relations underpinning the neoliberal university (Ball, 2012), nor individual academic responsibility for consciously held prejudices. Rather it can be seen as

acting in concert with such conscious prejudice and wider institutional cultures and social inequalities, to contribute towards an overall climate in which students' experiences of aspects of higher education experience including university admission (Burke & McManus, 2011; Purcell et al., 2009), classroom interactions (Crombie et al., 2003), and assessment (Read & Francis, 2003), can be seen as significantly informed by factors including their gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality among others. A key contribution for teachers of sociology within the academy is to develop understanding of the collective dimension of the issue of unconscious bias. This includes drawing on insights from perspectives including but not restricted to feminism, to actively interrogate the implications in terms of operationalisation of unconscious bias in the HE classroom, of our own positionality of relative power and privilege (Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill, 1996; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2003; Duckworth, 2013) as academics in relation to our students, along multiple lines of identity.

Work on unconscious bias in FE and HE to date, including that from ECU, has focused predominantly on managers, and recruitment and selection of staff (ECU, 2013; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012). But this leaves important questions remaining of what the responsibilities are of the majority of academic staff, who may not have responsibility for recruitment or selection of staff or be in management positions at all. There is a critical need to reorient more of our gaze towards the impact of unconscious bias on university *students*, and the power that not only managers but all academic staff have to influence students' futures through our interaction with them in the higher education classroom as well as through our assessment of their work and the writing of references for future employment and further study. For many of us the powerful memories remain acute of our own long since past, good and bad experiences of being taught, and the formative impact of these on our developing perception of our own intellectual ability and worth.

Discussions with higher education sector colleagues, however, reveal the scepticism with which the significance of unconscious bias as an issue and responsibility in our HE teaching is viewed by some. One such experience of this took place in giving an invited talk on issues including unconscious bias as an external speaker to teaching staff at a College of Further and Higher Education. The College was rurally located; the buildings, facilities, staff and students exuding middle-classness and privilege; and were almost exclusively white. I addressed my talk to not-the-most receptive looking sea of faces ever encountered, and was greeted by some less than convinced responses. After the talk two teachers came up separately to speak with me individually. The first said that she welcomed the discussion and that many of her colleagues needed to reflect on these issues. She described having experienced many years of prejudice and marginalisation from colleagues and students at the college, she perceived because of her sexual identity. The second teacher came to explain that the talk was not relevant at this college as they did not have any of these issues, and that if I wanted to 'build student belonging' then I should encourage students to spend time outside together enjoying nature, instead of suggesting problems where there were not any.

If the college in question is truly in the unusual position of not having any of 'these problems' perhaps then any potential students from more diverse backgrounds had either taken one look at the college surroundings, staff and students and surmised that they would not 'fit in' here (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). If any 'non-traditional' students had slipped through the net of self-censorship and applied to the college, perhaps they had then been weeded out by admissions biased towards traditional entrants (Burke & McManus, 2011; Purcell et al., 2009). While such experiences may be anecdotal and as such unique in their detail, they nevertheless also encapsulate wider mechanisms of power, inequality and exclusion that as such are relevant to us all as sociology teachers, as we encounter and challenge prejudice in our own attitudes and behaviour as well as that of our colleagues and students, in negotiating the institutional cultures in which we find ourselves working.

## What Can We Do?

For many academic staff our primary sphere of influence on our students' lives is through teaching and assessing them. This is hence the key domain of our responsibility to support equality of opportunity for diverse students to achieve their potential and benefit fully from the advantages of higher education participation. By consciously working to develop inclusive learning environments we both offer good practice to our students and model this within our discipline, institution and sector. It is also vital that in working to 'meet the needs of' diverse students, we do not present a deficit model that assumes a one-way flow of learning from the assumed superior knowledge of the institution to redress a perceived inferior starting point of non-traditional students (O'Shea, 2015). University participation of course offers acknowledged benefits to individuals' lives, but diverse students' complex life experiences also contribute richly to the higher education classroom (Ashwin, 2015).

The substantive focus of sociology as a discipline in particular lends itself to students drawing conceptual links between the topics of their classroom study and their wider lives. This pedagogical task of 'connecting sacred and everyday 'mundane' knowledge' (McLean et al., 2015, p. 187) can be central to igniting and nurturing the passion that develops a sociologist. Yet the drive to be academically rigorous and the demand to cover material for assessment in often contracting contact time and growing class sizes can pull against this, resulting in students' being discouraged from drawing on personal experience to respond to sociological issues in seminars or writing. Such privileging of strictly academic knowledge above more everyday knowledge and wider life experience can risk 'killing thinking' (Evans, 2004), de-politicising the curriculum to provide a sanitised version of sociology that erects an artificial division between the ideas being studied and students' everyday experiences of inequalities outside the classroom. As such it risks validating the very social inequalities that much of sociology as a discipline sets out to challenge.

Sociology as a discipline is taken up by students from all socio-economic classes (Houston & Lebeau, 2006). Mature, BME and working-class students may be disadvantaged by an approach to teaching and learning sociology that undervalues experience from areas including paid work and wider transferable skills, in favour of the purely academic knowledge and learning that are the focus of more privileged educational opportunity. Ashwin's *Reflective teaching in higher education* (2015) presents the example of a black sociology student at university who is criticised for drawing on personal experience in responding to an essay question. This resonates with Danvers and Gagnon's problematisation of 'normative discourses of what constitutes a legitimately engaged student in higher education' whereby some students are positioned as being problematic or misguided (2014, p. 1). This raises issues around lack of awareness of the relevance of social capital to informing dominant styles of communication in higher education (Morley, Eraut, Aynsley, MacDonald, & Shepherd, 2006), and consequently which students are entitled to speak in university classrooms and whose voices and contributions are heard as legitimate (Danvers & Gagnon, 2014, p. 2).

The student in Ashwin's vignette in turn criticises the sociology curricula she is presented with by her university as being unrecognisable to her, in only presenting negative perspectives on black people that appear to focus exclusively on social disadvantage rather than contribution. This resonates with Ahmed's theorisation of the way in which bodies are shaped by institutional discourses in higher education (2012); and further how rather than seeing:

> critical thinking as a cognitive act undertaken by 'reasoned' and detached bodies… it emerges both through the web of social, material and discursive knowledge practices that constitute criticality and with the different bodies that enact it. (Danvers, 2016, p. 2)

To problematise the drawing of such personal responses to curricula by students overlooks the opportunity for critical sociological thinking by students in the ability to 'perceive and understand that their individual life choices, circumstances, and troubles are shaped by larger social forces such as race, gender, social class and social institutions' (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2013, p. 493).

An inclusive curriculum is suggested to be 'one where all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account' (Morgan & Houghton, 2011, p. 7). Ashwin suggests that central to acknowledging the value and contribution of students from diverse backgrounds in the higher education classroom is to focus not only on substantive content but also on teaching and assessing more diverse and transferable skills from wider experience, including critical thinking. Such personal and transferable skills are often poorly represented in higher education curriculum design, where particularised disciplinary knowledge is often prioritised in Learning outcomes and assessments, above recognition of the understandings students bring from diverse prior experiences; ability to make connections between the academic and everyday; and developing skills for negotiating life, and not only employment, beyond the classroom.

For many sociologists, epistemological perspective rallies against assumptions as to knowledge in our own discipline or any other being reducible to facts. In

contrast many actively use the opportunity of the classroom not simply to rigidly impart curriculum content as ideas disembodied from the people who have them, but also to share with students the relevant everyday transferability of these ideas as they relate to their own experiences, perspectives, commitments and convictions. This contributes centrally to bringing sociology to life for diverse students with their different journeys into higher education, and holds at least equal if not greater value compared to the latest sociology textbook. Such validation of wider experience can in turn both help diverse students to make connections between their personal experiences and formal curricula, and acknowledge the drawing of such parallels as legitimate academic thinking. As McLean et al. identify, 'sociological knowledge is about understanding the relationship between biography and socio-economic structure' (2015, p. 187). Further, it has been argued now more than 20 years ago that 'sociologists must design assignments that allow students to think critically in writing about personal experiences and social events' (Bidwell, 1995, p. 401).

This offers the potential to ameliorate the feelings of marginalisation and unbelonging (Cotterill, Jackson, & Letherby, 2007), the positioning of 'one who is not at home' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43) that can conspire to prevent diverse constituents from benefitting fully from the opportunities of higher education. The following excerpt comes from reflective writing[1] carried out by first term undergraduates on a Critical study skills module I convene:

> *When I first arrived at the University I didn't feel that I fitted in anywhere and I felt very alone, I struggled to make friends, and I thought in a roundabout way that I was the only one who was feeling this way... I also felt that the course I had chosen wasn't the right one for me I wasn't getting the idea of what we were meant to be doing, I think I was expecting to know everything already, but if that was the case I wouldn't need to be here! All I needed I think was some time to settle down and get into the habits of the course find the right balance and settle down, which I feel I have done now, I've made friends.*
>
> *I'm a shy person in life and find it difficult to express myself and put my points across in an environment that is full of people, I work better in smaller groups of people, as I don't feel that I'm as intimidated, this is something that I would like to work on. I noticed this more when I did my weeks reading, the feedback that I got from one of my classmates, stated that I didn't give much eye-contact, and I rushed my words at times, trying to finished as fast as possible. During my classes I also notice that I wait for other people to speak out first, then think to myself that I was going to say exactly what they had, I need to have more confidence in myself to speak my mind more often and not worry so much on whether what I have said is right or wrong.*

The mechanisms through which such silencing through self-censoring can operate in the HE classroom are summarised succinctly in the following excerpt from an interview with a university student who is the daughter of a lone parent:

> You'd always find the same people talking [in class], but I think that's because the lecturer would think they were more intelligent. … It's the words you use as well. So, for example, say that you can't articulate yourself properly. You're as intelligent as the other

[1]Reproduced with permission

> person, but because you haven't had the same schooling or haven't had the same upbringing, they all think that person clearly knows more than you. … I feel intimidated to talk to them [lecturers], and then sometimes I think they'll think I'm stupid. And that sounds silly, but I think that they'll think I'm stupid – or I don't put my hand up [in class]. (Gagnon, 2016, p. 154).

The irony of discouraging students from drawing parallels between their personal experiences and ideas studied at university is that in doing so, we disconnect students from engaging in become complicit in replicating pedagogic approaches by which 'particular accounts become more visible or valued' (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p. 35).

Our opportunities for actively impacting the content of the curricula we deliver as HE teachers can feel limited by constraints including the time demands on us, institutional and external quality assurance processes, assigned responsibility for teaching previously developed curriculum content, team teaching, and particularly for more junior academics in teaching on modules convened by more senior colleagues. It is important nevertheless that there do remain spaces of opportunity within this for us to affect the teaching and learning experience that we deliver to students. Even teaching decisions made at the micro-level of planning lecture and seminar activities, examples and additional resources that we employ have the potential to importantly mediate the messages that students take away about how valued and knowledgeable they are, and the extent to which they belong, within the discipline, institution and wider HE environment.

I have been lucky to have had the opportunity to develop a core sociology module in critical reading and writing skills. I say lucky, despite suspecting the main reason for this being that nobody else wanted to do it. Perceptions of study skills teaching at university appear unified by frequent scepticism from colleagues and students alike. My research interests in diversity, (in)equalities and inclusion in higher education however informed this being a welcome opportunity to embed within the core undergraduate sociology curriculum, skills central to supporting the learning experience of students with diverse backgrounds, life experiences and educational trajectories.

Topic focus weighed towards supporting development of academic confidence and engagement above exclusively academic knowledge and skills, given that knowledge that the latter would be the focus of the majority of students' HE experiences throughout their degrees. Support for developing oral presentation skills hence focused on overcoming anxiety, above structuring of content (although this was also included). Remembering the unattractiveness of study skills sessions from sociology undergraduate experience, these were incorporated into substantive disciplinary content through weekly focus on successive chapters of a key text. The first module text selected was contemporary American sociologist Venkatesh's *Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist crosses the line* (2008). This was chosen after rejecting several recommendations made by departmental colleagues, on the basis of them being *too* self-consciously sociological and academic. Here once again I knew that this would not deprive students of what they should expect to and needed to learn in an academic sociology

department. In simultaneous modules on which I had also previously taught, students would be reading substantial sections of classic sociological texts such as Marx and Engels' *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). The key criterion for the reading selection for this first term Critical reading and writing module was the aim of switching the students *on* rather than *off* in terms of their own self-perceived ability to engage with, understand and even enjoy independent reading in their discipline in their first term at university; and further that academic reading need not inevitably be unrecognisable compared to other more familiar textual sources. The module design was subsequently rolled out across other social science undergraduate programmes including Criminology, and Childhood and Youth Studies. Once again, core study skills centred around development as a critical learner and could be delivered through focus on disciplinarily relevant substantive content.

## Conceptualising Our Professional Responsibilities

The widening participation agenda may have opened up higher education to diverse learners, but in doing so creates new challenges in negotiating situations of relatively disadvantaged positioning. The development of widening participation discourse and interventions has shown that it is not enough simply to open the door of the academy to previously excluded groups. Just as in wider society, there is the very real potential for these students to remain on a pathway right through their higher education and out the other end into their graduate lives, that is inferior to their more privileged peers in terms of the opportunities that they are able to access in practice (MacDonald, 2013).

Discussion here has focused largely on our individual responsibilities as sociology teachers in higher education, to reflect on and affect our own practice in acknowledgement of wider social inequalities. This is not in any way to undermine the case for more collective action, lobbying or critique of contemporary trends in the higher education institutions we inhabit professionally, that in many ways worryingly perpetuates and repackages long-standing aspects of inequality rather than dismantling them. It is paramount that we continue to challenge this by identifying what is wrong and applying pressure that those in the most powerful positions to affect change in the academy should do so. Yet given that the neoliberal university continues to flourish (Ball, 2012) regardless of critique against it, our support for more equitable opportunities for diverse students in higher education need also to be applied to more practical actions in our everyday lives as university teachers.

Here there may be important lessons for higher education institutions to learn from the teaching-intensive universities within the sector, with the most elite institutions potentially having the furthest to travel in terms of supporting the needs of their diverse students (Reay, 2003). McLean et al.'s (2015) study of UK universities found that those using curricula most effectively to support the future employability of their sociology undergraduates were not the most prestigious institutions in terms

of research profile. Disciplinarily, McLean et al. (2015) question Bernstein's (2000) conceptualisation of sociology as a discipline that does not strongly represent a particular classified disciplinary pedagogic identity in terms of perceived ways of thinking and being. In contrast they find a strong disciplinary core of such singularity within academic sociology teaching departments. I have heard sociology colleagues who I very much respect, and whose professional interests are directly oriented to critiquing social inequalities, nevertheless posture with regard to our teaching responsibilities that our role as academics is to impart disciplinary knowledge, not 'skills' development, be this for study, employment, or wider personal life skills. This contrasts with the identified potential as discussed here and elsewhere for embedding skills in HE curricula to support and validate the experiences of diverse students.

I would argue that acknowledging the relevance of embedding teaching and recognition of wider skills beyond substantive content represents a key element of our responsibilities as higher education teachers. This relates to the requirements set out in The Higher Education Academy's UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF, 2011). Of the four core values identified by the UKPSF as being relevant to the responsibilities of higher education teachers, three of these relate directly to the issues discussed here:

- Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities (Core Value 1)
- Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners (Core value 2)
- Acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates, recognising the implications for professional practice (Core value 4)

Even the embedding in curricula of support and recognition for students' wider skills including critical thinking should not however be perceived as an automatic solution to enhancing validation of students' diversity and experiences. Despite critical thinking being identified as one of the most important learning goals of sociology, Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2013) highlight the lack of consensus as to exactly what critical thinking in higher education actually means and entails; and even more so, critical sociological thinking. As Burke has warned, there remains the potential for academia's appropriation of critical thinking to present a depoliticised version that reinforces rather than challenges the privileging of particular forms of knowledge and the social identities associated with these (2012).

As higher education teachers we need to recognise the difference that we can make to students' lives through our willingness to actively develop inclusive learning environments in which diverse students can belong and achieve their potential in its fullest sense, both academic, and as 'critical beings' (Barnett, 1997) in their wider lives. This represents a shift in focus from what critical thinking *is* to what it *does* (Danvers, 2016, p. 3). For less privileged students the confidence gains and personal transformation of university can be higher because of the greater boundaries that have been crossed in the process of becoming a university student, with McLean et al. arguing that 'the acquisition of critical understanding leading to confidence in one's personal life is closely related to Nussbaum's capability of 'practical reason'

whereby an individual can plan her or his own 'good' life (McLean et al., 2015, p. 190). This can form an important part of non-traditional students gaining a worthwhile return for their resource investment in higher education (Hinton-Smith, 2016).

I suggest that the disciplinary positioning of sociologists implies a particularly relevant role in this process. Just as the academic discipline of Women's Studies (before it was largely subsumed by Gender Studies) was criticised by opponents for being 'non-academic' in being informed by a particular political goal beyond the imparting of apparently objective intellectual knowledge (Patai & Koertge, 2003), sociology as a discipline is argued to be characterised by social and moral ambition through its application of theory to social problems (Halsey, 2004). Further, the significance has been observed of much of 'UK sociology's strong focus on the link between social critique and social reform' (McLean et al., 2015, p. 186). For those of us the point remains, as Marx and Engels (1888) identified over 150 years ago, not only to understand the world, but to change it.

I suggest moreover that our disciplinary focus on the interactions that take place in social institutions and the unequal power dynamics operating within these imply not only responsibility to reflect on, and more so interrogate the potential spaces for the perpetuation of marginalisation and exclusions in our own HE teaching practice. We need also to take responsibility for remaining astute to, and calling to account where necessary, the problematic behaviour of our students and colleagues in the practice of HE Teaching and Learning. This includes our students and colleagues both within and outside our own discipline. Our responsibilities as reflexive higher education teachers are not only to mediate our own behaviour and that of colleagues, but also to take account in our teaching planning and delivery of the ways in which our students operate both consciously and unconsciously held prejudices towards one another on the basis of aspects of social identity, and the ways in which these manifest in classroom activity. We have a professional responsibility to challenge such prejudiced behaviour in both our colleagues and students, and such challenges can be made in a positive spirit of 'calling in' rather than 'calling out' (Ahmad, 2015) with the aim of contributing towards development of greater self-reflection and understanding, and the fostering of more inclusive higher education cultures for the benefit of all.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. How can we as individual HE or FE teachers contribute to developing inclusive learning experiences for diverse students?
2. Do we as sociology teachers have any particular responsibilities, advantages and challenges in creating inclusive learning experiences for diverse students?
3. What is the role of curriculum, including the relationship between substantive disciplinary content and wider skills, in terms of ensuring inclusive learning experiences for diverse students (including Learning Outcomes, Teaching and Learning approaches, and assessment and feedback)?

4. What is the relationship between individual and institutional responsibility in creating inclusive university cultures?
5. Are there problems with assuming that encouraging and recognising criticality and wider skills will automatically support diverse students in their HE or FE participation?

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# Chapter 6
# Twitter as Part of an Online Learning Cultures Approach: Exploring a Lecturer's and a Student-Teacher's Perspectives

**Ursula Edgington and Jade Wilton**

**Abstract** Twitter is a popular – some would say 'unique' – social networking and micro-blogging site. Although social networking sites are viewed by some as 'a distraction' to learning, research suggests they can often be used proactively by teachers in all sectors, to share ideas, texts and images in a positive and informal way. Twitter in particular has been found to enhance learning outcomes through encouraging student creativity and social engagement.

Using an auto/biographical interpretive approach, this theoretical, reflective chapter about using Twitter, draws on the authors' two individual perspectives as lecturer and student-teacher. Within the context of a New Zealand university, we draw on a multi-disciplinary 'learning cultures' model, founded on the sociology. Presenting metaphorical ideas, together with practical pedagogical strategies, we explain how the theoretical tools within a learning cultures approach, resonate with Māori philosophy. Māori concepts of ako [learning/teaching] and Te Whāriki [a woven mat for all to stand on] illuminate Twitter as an empowering 'third space' for connected, multi-cultural learning.

## Introduction

Twitter is a micro-blogging, social networking site, where public posts and interactions are limited to 280 characters. After its launch in 2006, use of Twitter grew exponentially and after a subsequent decline in users, in recent years (arguably, due to the 'Trump Effect'), its popularity has increased: at the time of writing over 319 million regular users tweet on average over 500 million posts per day (Jimerson, 2015). The public and diverse nature of tweet interactions has been

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argued to be the reason why university students (and educators in particular) have been enthusiastic to engage with Twitter (Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2013). As one UK student-teacher tweeted recently:

> It's more than worth it, I've learnt loads of new ideas from Twitter. It's like a big, live, book of ideas! (via @TrainingToTeach)

An important aspect of learning with Twitter is how it can encourage an engagement with the topic in a community outside the physical (or virtual) classroom (Birch, 2013). For instance, making cross-disciplinary connections with news articles bring new context to learning tasks and assessments, especially if they have personal significance (Boud, 2009). It can also add valuable humour to an otherwise unappealing topic or concept (Ellingson, 2013). Importantly, these kinds of strategies may be particularly meaningful for Māori students who often place high value on the concept of a *whānau* [extended family] as a shared community of experiential learning (Mahuika, Berryman, & Bishop, 2011). But as Reeves and Gomm (2015) have argued, it is the *how and why* this shared community is experienced that needs to be explored. What does this kind of community engagement offer students and teachers that is different from other learning communities they may participate in? Addressing this issue, this chapter argues how a learning cultures approach could bring new insights to this shared community experience. As an holistic multi-cultural approach to pedagogy, it embraces the contextualisation of learning through visual and metaphorical ideas.

Firstly, this chapter will summarise the academic literature of the theoretical concepts in a learning cultures approach, which as we explain, carries some resonance with Māori philosophy of learning. Author vignettes are presented as examples of our individual perspectives of *Pākehā* (European), lecturer and Māori, student-teacher. After each vignette, some examples of the practical application and experience of this approach will be discussed through the lens of a learning cultures model. In particular, we use the metaphor of *Te Whāriki* [a woven mat for all to stand on] to illustrate how Twitter can empower individuals engaged in connected learning experiences. Finally, these concepts and perspectives are drawn together to assert Twitter be more widely put to use in enhancing contextual, multi-cultural pedagogies, in online courses and elsewhere.

## What Is a 'Learning Cultures' Approach?

A learning cultures approach is based on multi-disciplinary theoretical tools from Bourdieu (1991). The underlying principles employed in this approach are that learning is socially experienced, so that rather than using individualised concepts of learning, learning is seen as something that is always cultural. This also acknowledges that the practices and definitions of learning vary and are structured by powerful interests as well as individual choices (James & Biesta, 2007). In other words, a shared community of learning through social interactions is crucial to individual learning journeys. The conceptual framework of learning cultures

has been utilised in various educational environments, including tertiary colleges (James & Biesta, 2007); community education (Birch, 2013) and universities (James, 2013). It has also been discussed in the broader context of learning-oriented assessment and teachers' perceptions of 'best practice' (Carless, 2015). However, this chapter is unique in drawing comparisons with Aotearoa New Zealand's Māori language and philosophy. This analysis is valuable because, as Biesta (2011) argues, often learning is founded on strongly embedded assumptions based on societal norms and the unhelpful binary language of Western world-views. In addressing these issues, a learning cultures approach seeks to deconstruct and transcend these assumptions, through valuing and sharing personal knowledge and experiences.

When considering the impact of specific academic disciplines in universities and the boundaries they create, it could be argued that rather than critiquing Western understandings, institutions further embed these biases (Boud, 2009). But if continuing social inequalities in societies are to be addressed through education, it is exactly these assumptions that need to be deconstructed and challenged (Bourdieu, 1991). This is particularly relevant in the New Zealand context, where Māori and Pasifika students are under-represented in tertiary education and within senior positions in the workplace (Mahuika et al., 2011). Arguably, sharing and respecting diverse life experiences forms an important way of raising awareness of, and overcoming stereotypical prejudice and a learning cultures approach presents valuable ways to address this. Practical application of a learning cultures model through using Twitter will be discussed later in this chapter, however first it's important to briefly explain the philosophical theory behind learning cultures and its relevance within a New Zealand online learning context.

## Theoretical Concepts of a Learning Cultures Approach

Consideration of the interactions between physical, social, spiritual and emotional aspects of learning are widely accepted as crucial when re/designing any course and assessment (Illeris, 2002). In the New Zealand context, this approach is conceptualised by *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, a contemporary Māori paradigm originally used for Māori-focused healthcare initiatives (Durie, 1994). *Te Whare Tapa Whā* is often symbolised by the four sides of the *marae* or community meeting-house, which represent the influences upon individuals. The four elements are: *te taha wairua*, the spiritual aspects; *te taha hinengaro*, the psychological or emotional aspects; te *taha tinana*, the physical body; and *te taha whānau*, the family, extended family and wider community. This arrangement will be familiar to Western educationalists, where curricula strategies are commonly divided into Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Social (PIES) (e.g. Stitch, 2010). Like the four quarters needed to complete the (holistic) PIES 'circle', a metaphorical building cannot stand without the stability of all four walls and this represents the importance of the lived environment. For successful learning and well-being,

balance is required and any breakdown in this stability may result in negative consequences for the individual and their wider community. This holistic perspective is reflected in numerous psychological learning theories worldwide and remains highly relevant when deconstructing assumptions about how the context of students' lives interconnects with institutionally prescribed learning objectives.

However, this paradigm is argued to be reductionist; rather than four separate entities forming an holistic approach, these complex aspects of an individual's context and interactions within learning processes, overlap and are interwoven (e.g. Heaton, 2011). Furthermore, definitions of these terms cannot be simplified to Western worldviews; the Māori language reflects diverse interpretations including the historical evolution of phrases through etymology, cosmogony, spirituality and biology (Walker, 1990/2004). For instance, the definition of *te taha tinana*, [the physical body] includes organs such as the *hinengaro* [spleen] which as well as performing its biological function, is also believed to be the centre of an individual's emotions and memories (Salmond, 1985). Māori ways of knowing do not comprise unhelpful binary divisions between biological and emotional, these natural aspects of lived experiences are unified and interrelated, not only within individuals but through ancestral biographies (Pihama et al., 2014). Māori genealogy is a powerful entity incorporating perspectives acquired from *whakapapa* [ancestors] such as the spiritual embrace that depends upon the natural balance of entire environment. For example, one individual wakes up to rain; today is his grandfather's funeral and rain is interpreted as a sign of loss from his ancestors. Similarly, another individual sets off to work, and sees the rain as cleansing and renewing the air; interpreting this as invigorating their day ahead. In short, Māori philosophy emphasises how individuals feel connected to the environment that holds them within that knowledge.

Understandably, however, these different philosophical understandings may be difficult to grasp for those unfamiliar with this worldview, hence sharing creative pedagogies that are an intrinsic part of a learning cultures approach could be useful. One creative strategy is metaphor, which, like art, allows for the unspoken to become articulated; ambiguities of words or pictures that contain irony, or pun can be deconstructed and re/interpreted (Bourdieu, 1993). Writers such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued convincingly that metaphors influence our worldview – emphasising uncertainties of thought and language. Metaphors are therefore important in encouraging teacher-researchers to make sense of our social worlds and to ask questions – especially when individuals' interpretations differ. In this way, new conversations are opened up, because they encourage us to see how social structures are not concrete, but actually co-exist and interact with each other and with their own objectives. As Grenfell and James (1998, p. 172) noted, Bourdieu acknowledged how the unobserved is not necessarily unknowable, and has value too; hence its importance in teaching and learning. Because metaphors are flexible, meanings can be stretched, deconstructed and re-built in attempting to develop new ideas and meanings (Ellingson, 2008). When creating multi-cultural pedagogies then, metaphors could provide a useful interpretive tool to enhance conversations about conceptual knowledge (Edgington, 2014).

Usefully, there are valuable alternative models to *Te Whare Tapa Whā* in the New Zealand educational context. For instance, *Te Whāriki* [a woven mat for all to stand on] forms part of the New Zealand national curriculum. The document defines overall objectives for *early childhood* programs, but as a metaphor, *Te Whāriki* could be argued to have wider, symbolic meanings that inspire individuals of all ages and cultures to 'weave' their own learning, empowering them within a reciprocal relationship. This is particularly relevant for student-teachers then, because it encourages contribution and engagement in society and critical thinking skills, something that (as we illustrate later in this chapter), social media such as Twitter can support. Rather than adhering to traditional Western structures of meaning in a curriculum framework of physical, intellectual, emotional and social factors, *Te Whāriki* is grounded in socio-cultural theory (Biesta, 2011). Interactions are therefore the centre of students' activities, co-constructing their own knowledge and understandings (Illeris, 2002). Hence the philosophy of lifelong learning as a fluid, developmental process is embraced, within a diverse, multi-cultural and digital society (Coffield, 2000). Practical application of this approach can therefore be addressed through the use of mediums like Twitter, because it embodies a structure of diverse social interactions.

Exploring the deeper meanings of using *Te Whāriki* through metaphor provides some valuable insights into conceptualisations of learning, including the shared learning experienced through Twitter. In a practical sense, the complexity could be argued to be embodied in the traditional Māori weaving techniques symbolised here:

A woven artefact is created through careful weaving, constructed through the layering patterns of interconnecting leaves from the flax plant. Each layer is built upon to create a structure, the pattern of which is significant because it has been handed-down through generations of skilled ancestors through narrative and song. With this in mind, *Te Whāriki* becomes a useful metaphor for deeper understandings of one of the key concepts of a learning cultures approach: Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* defines the complex interwoven contexts of our learning lives (Bourdieu, 1991). Dynamics that we each bring to every situation and relationship is an intrinsic part of how we learn and interact (Reay, 2004). The consolidation of past decisions, experiences, as well as our hopes and expectations, interact together within 'fields' of different pressures and rules or *doxa*. Similarly, in Māori tradition, the flax plant itself holds sacred meanings with intrinsic *doxa*, through symbolising family members of *whānau*. The central, younger shoots of the plant are seen as the 'child', with 'parent' leaves either side. Traditionally, leaves acceptable for use in weaving are the older, weaker outside leaves; representing 'grandparents'. This is a powerful metaphorical representation of intergenerational aspects of past, present and futures that we explained briefly above.

Bourdieu explains how our habitus may be outwardly interpreted by others through our accent or body language. Our habitus provides an interpretation of 'one's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 474), as well as simultaneously, internally being a part *of* it. In the modern field of social media, this concept takes on new meaning; our publicly available 'profile' may be inauthentic through strategic manipulation; different to our

'genuine' selves. Furthermore, our public interactions may be with individuals whom we have never (physically) met and who may too be performing a virtual identity for a specific purpose. Twitter is one way of engaging in this interaction because it gives voice to individuals who might otherwise not be heard; providing an opportunity of empowerment.

Habitus is multi-dimensional, for example, it could be seen in the innate but hidden skills within a teacher's professional habitus (Grenfell & James, 1998) and the emotional resilience teachers and students may develop over time (Hargreaves, 2000). For us, the importance of trying to understand our own habitus resonates with the context of our lives and how professional habitus brings value and meaning to our interactions in teaching and learning. For instance, our ancestors, family background, gender, age, past and current experiences in different cultures and contexts brings unique significance to the processes involved in communications with students, peers, colleagues and research participants (Denzin, 1984). Other aspects of professional habitus may include fears and aspirations, real or imagined (or a combination of both). And it is interesting to note how these interactions differ depending on whether they are via Tweets or other virtual communications. As authors, this brings significance to our reflections and writings, and simultaneously our continuing professional development as (student) teachers and researchers. This is because no researcher begins a project as such; our context and re/presentations to our selves are an integral part of the processes and outcomes of our thinking and writing (Mills, 1959).

In an online learning environment, rules or *doxa* exist to protect individuals from potential harm. By definition, *doxa* are unspoken; they may be innate or hidden. Some students may already have experience of online learning, and be familiar with the concepts of engaging with a forum or commenting on a podcast. Others, however, may still be in the process of 'learning to learn' and yet this status may be invisible to others in the group (including the teacher/lecturer). As we explain below, Twitter can be used to break down some of these boundaries and to encourage experiential learning activities that de-mystify some of these rules (Poore, 2013). Transposing the concepts important in a learning cultures environment into a virtual classroom can bring new meanings to researching and resources, contextualising them. In turn, these reflections provide inspiration for new ways of learning and teaching.

In essence then, a learning cultures approach seeks to enable pedagogical strategies which help to draw and reflect on past experiences and knowledge and future aspirations in a mutually respectful atmosphere, so each student is recognised and valued (Biesta, 2011; James & Biesta, 2007). In the New Zealand context, this resonates with the Māori concept of *ako* [teaching/learning] – a symbolic inter-relationship between student and teacher in that learning is non-hierarchical and a shared experience (Simpson & Williams, 2012). This concept is used in classrooms where differentiation is aimed at addressing Māori and Pasifika students' needs, through approaches which are defined as holistic and creative. By drawing on evidenced-based, diverse pedagogical strategies which embrace the ethos of *ako*, Twitter can help towards developing a learning cultures approach where teacher, teacher-student and student outcomes are enhanced.

**Vignette 1: Ursula**

A few years ago, I was a voluntary convenor for the British Sociological Association (BSA)'s 'Postgraduate Forum' – which was a special interest group of mainly PhD social-science students. As well as distributing a regular email via a 'newsletter' facility, I also utilised social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This not only provided a cost-effective way of disseminating information, it also allowed any interested individuals to engage with the research community in events, jobs, funding opportunities and other items of interest.

It quickly became obvious that Twitter was a favoured platform by many new and experienced academics and that this was a fast and effective way of communicating local and international issues, sharing blog posts and writing feedback. The hashtag #phdchat is now well developed, including regular synchronous conversations that occur – facilitated by individuals from various disciplines. Other hashtags regularly become part of these tweets (e.g. #writing, #loveHE and #academia) which encourage a broad range of research-active individuals to join the conversation. These individuals are all at different stages of their research project, often with valuable suggestions to share. It is difficult to imagine a more open and fun way to explore and learn. Not only about the research subject per se, but also about connected matters – published authors, funding opportunities and new/s articles.

I always encourage my students – at all levels of learning – to set-up a Twitter profile and experiment with searching items of interest – personal and professional. The fun of Twitter is seeing the professional and personal side-by-side; the promotion of a book by an author, might be preceded by a photo of her walking her dog, for example and this demystifies the world of academia. Often it's the genuine humanness of these interactions that offers a more meaningful understanding of lived experiences within the research process. After paying due consideration to privacy settings and 'netiquette', Twitter offers a unique opportunity. Indeed, research must have been very isolating for some individuals before Twitter, in comparison with the superb possibilities to engage and share all that the Twitter #phdchat and other communities now offer.

Diverse types of conversations with known and unknown 'followers' on Twitter can help individuals build self-confidence and also assist in them getting to know their own classmates in an informal environment. At the beginning of any learning journey – no matter how short – it is important to build rapport between everyone involved (Knowles, 1985). In a conventional classroom environment, this can be fairly straightforward; applied through popular 'ice-breaking' or 'team-building' tasks and less-structured 'tea-break' socialising. The online environment presents some very specific challenges in this respect, but the principles remain the same. Introducing the 'rules of the game', the *doxa* that will

become the context to this and further learning can be incorporated into a fun quiz or puzzle (Ellingson, 2013). This can be shared through Twitter, which can, in turn, also provide valuable feedback from students on its usefulness.

Building a culture of learning needs an open and trusting environment, and that can be achieved through self-assessment strategies and playfulness, such as tasks that involve sharing favourite music. Twitter has proved an especially useful medium for sharing videos or clips. As the vignette above explained, by combining them under a specific hashtag (e.g. #[the course identifier]) for the group of students to see, this encourages interaction about music, which also has relevance for developing and sharing study-skill strategies. Another subject valuable for building rapport in this way is asking students to search Twitter and tweet about what (other) kinds of learning strategies they find useful on a personal level (Salmon, 2003). This task always provides some new ideas that can be added to suggestions for future cohorts, building a shared community which develops over time.

For those students who prefer to stay within the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and who have not (yet) fully explored the potential of Twitter, a Twitter 'feed' can easily be added to the VLE, presenting students a summary of the current tweets from relevant hashtags within a manageable box, alongside other learning materials. Experience has taught me how a tweet reminding students about an assignment deadline or a new reading text available is highly effective as a way of gaining attention. When also incorporated into the VLE, it provides another motivation for students to engage with Twitter to see what other posts may be useful or inspirational to them.

It's the openness of the communication possibilities that provides the key to Twitter's appeal. Whether it's a conversation with a favourite celebrity or some encouragement from a colleague, the accessibility of these conversations is open to anyone who chooses to get involved. Hence, in these ways and others, Twitter provides a multi-cultural environment where opportunities for different types of learning communities can emerge – through synchronous as well as asynchronous discussions. But balancing this is important in developing an interactional learning space (Salmon, 2003). The dynamics of the classroom changes if synchronous meetings or 'Tweet-chats' are held and these should always be optional as not all students will be able to attend or perhaps feel comfortable contributing to a discussion at a pre-determined time (Bowles, 2004). Students may be present either in real-time or later, but either way not necessarily provide evidence of engagement in the debates. However, this silent 'lurking' in the background of a discussion might not be wholly negative; indeed, it may be valuable thinking time for some students, that may not become apparent until a later assessment (Reeves & Gomm, 2015). As we pointed out in the metaphor of *Te Whāriki*, the spaces between the woven pieces are equally important to the pattern and structure of the mat. Similarly, these spaces empower others to use their own voice when they are able to metaphorically 'stand up' upon *Te Whāriki to* articulate their perspectives. The importance of accessibility to asynchronous discussion for students from rural areas is particularly relevant in the New Zealand context, where Internet broadband services are frequently unreliable and/or costly.

It is widely acknowledged that the benefits of 'flipped classrooms' can significantly enhance learning outcomes (Bowles, 2004; Brooks, Nolan, &, Gallagher, 2001; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Salmon, 2003). This means fully exploiting a VLEs potential, in particular, in enhancing equal opportunities of fair accessibility for students with specific needs. These measures can include tweeting helpful hyperlinks to resources for students such as additional learning support tutors and the university library. The ability to add modern, fun, relevant and engaging course content promotes students who can use their devices (BYOD) in diverse settings to explore embedded study skills such as library forums and educational blogs, research and employment search tools, social networking skills and online safety (netiquette). In particular, using Twitter to enhance a blended learning experience of students using a flipped classroom technique allows absentees to the virtual classroom to catch up and provides additional readings for those students who are of higher ability and/or are further advanced in their studies. This differentiation is important because technological knowledge outside the physical classroom is valuable when employers demand these skills be enhanced, not neglected. This is why explorations of how social media such as Twitter can be used in all types of lifelong learning environments – including the workplace – are so essential.

Using these and similar strategies to contextualise learning and bring it some real-life relevance for students also has the advantage of connecting lecturers with opportunities for reflective interactions. If online 'Tweet chats' with peers and/or students or networking events where relevant research-informed pedagogy is debated, these can usefully support the ongoing processes of development of online courses and lecturers' agency, thereby embracing a broad definition of a learning cultures approach. The Māori word *ako* is therefore embodied in Twitter interactions by presenting symbiotic relationships between students and teachers, whether in formally defined roles or not. Returning to the usefulness of metaphor, the concept of *ako* has been presented as a *tuangi* model; the two sides of the clam shellfish cannot exist in isolation, nor without the 'context' of the seawater around it (Simpson & Williams, 2012). On that note, we present the second vignette:

**Vignette 2: Jade**

As a female, Māori student, my needs for an optimal learning environment involve more than just academic know-how, I need a reciprocal student–teacher relationship to share my own experiences and mix these into the learning; contextualising meanings so I can achieve the best outcome. In this way, not only am I absorbing my lecturer's insights, but in turn, sharing the unique attributes my culture offers to communicate a varied perspective. That's because, Māori philosophy of learning holds a deeper meaning than contemporary ideas of student-centredness; it emphasises the belief that it is unnatural for students to walk an academic pathway unsupported.

Initially I was introduced to Twitter because of an online academic writing course at university. It opened up a reciprocal relationship that unfolded

(continued)

**Vignette 2: Jade** (continued)
during my learning journey with my lecturer, and with her guidance, Twitter invited me to a place where I could extend my own learning. I am a person who no longer engages with Facebook, because I am reluctant to share my personal opinions of the 'day in the life' posts of various meals, statuses, locations and virtual gifts. These posts became a rather tiresome chore to 'like' when I did not have time to participate, and check that I was still 'friends' with people I didn't actually know or others I could alternatively just email or phone when required. Within Facebook I hadn't found an intellectual community of voices I wanted to engage with; instead, it was a 'family and friends' network.

I found the intention of using Twitter to improve my academic writing motivating. Twitter definitely forced me to write better, as the 140 characters (recently increased to 280 characters) maximum limit made me concise, detailed and direct, what I now refer to as my 'writer fitness'. As I had no expectations, I was surprised that there was a place that academic perspective existed, and a supportive research environment was thriving. For me, this was invaluable by way of investigating via publications, journals and blog exploration. It also gave my opinion credibility and 'approval', by way of retweet or 'liking', which developed my skills as a writer, and in turn my academic confidence. The Twitter effect is a measurable one, especially for someone like myself, who due to family and other commitments, has limited time. It enabled me to gain new academic opportunities by making the interaction with the community as specific to my needs as I required, by using hashtags. It is one academic tool and relationship with my lecturer I would now not be without.

Definitions of the Māori word *ako*, as described earlier, are centrally important to student achievement, because it is where an authentic, responsive and reflective learning practice of reciprocity is shared between teacher and learner. With the concept of *ako* in mind, students do not attend university alone; a cultural identity means strengths of *whakapapa* [ancestors] are also present, along with the support of *whānau* [extended family]. Importantly, *ako* sits alongside *whānau* as an inseparable coupling. Reflecting the concept of Bourdieu's habitus, Māori student identity is more than 'what meets the eye'; its complex cultural layers, such as indigenous spirituality are interconnected with physical being.

A classroom is a space of purpose; there is an underlying connection to educational frameworks such as collaborative professional learning and development. In order for this to happen, it has to be effectively maintained, so staying connected to learners' needs is essential. A student-teacher can be challenged to keep learning, which is an integral aspect of professional practice, and on a daily basis this can be articulated through Twitter. *Ako* is present within Twitter because it consists of a supportive community or *whānau*.

Conceptualising Twitter as *Te Whāriki* provides a metaphor which consolidates the multiple meanings within the artefact of a skilfully hand-woven mat, which, through its cultural significance to *whānau* and *ako* can empower individuals engaged in connected learning experiences. The nature of Twitter enables a new virtual classroom of collaboration and openness – to share, exchange, demonstrate and impact diverse learning. This 'third space' of learning – from the physical and/or virtual classroom and external factors that develop from it – adds variety to my interactions and encourages students to view the world through different eyes, political stances, and cultural attitudes. One recent example of this is through the Tweets surrounding the Presidential election in the USA; Donald Trump's Twitter account (@therealdonaldtrump) has recently been the focus of intense political controversy in respect of perceived prejudice and social inequality. This new way of accessing such a diversity of knowledge adds depth to teaching and learning discussions with *whānau*: it is unlikely I would have become so politically aware or engaged with these debates, without Twitter.

Because Twitter promotes sharing publicly a personal perspective, participating means giving voice to topics of interest and passion, then in turn, within the Twitter community, there is the opportunity to see it from others' viewpoints. This can be invaluable during the writing process when seeking to refute a thesis statement. Examples of these can be seen when a hashtag is used, and in real-time participants are able to view pictures, and perhaps videos of those in attendance at a specific event. Links associated with the topic, including information shared from varying sources are also tweeted. As a student-teacher, I have experienced how empowering it is to draw my own conclusions, according to the information people have shared, and to then develop research, ideas and lessons triggered by these interactions. This shows how, by using Twitter as a resource full of captured global moments, a learning platform of rich educational content is created. These interactions can be drawn upon and used in teaching practice, as I illustrate below.

Twitter allows for connections to be formed with people, communities or organisations, including Māori representatives such as @mihi_forbes and @MaoRRiCulture. The community I have selected to 'follow' is supportive and proactive in their voice, immensely helping my studies and opportunities to be successful. Considering I am not engaged in a traditional classroom setting of face-to-face learning, this provides evidence of how meaningful active participation in alternative ways can be. Another example of a Twitter account I follow is @Edutopia, which is a US-based educational charity, founded by filmmaker George Lucas (Edutopia, 2016). I have tried many of the free, quick ideas to teach children with very few resources, such as learning 'process drama'. This is a pedagogical technique where, after researching, students adopt historically important characters to act-out in the classroom. In this way, every child can become someone else, and express their knowledge in a safe environment, free from risk of ridicule of peers. This form of dramaturgical approach to learning also means that every type of learner is included in this classroom activity, as auditory, visual and kinaesthetic opportunities occur as it unfolds.

**Fig. 6.1** A weave created on a live flax plant at Arapuni, Waikato (credit: taken by the authors)

Like the woven flax in Fig. 6.1, the carved artefact shown in Fig. 6.2 is a piece that includes symbolic gaps within a pattern. This carving carries significance as a family artefact and therefore embedded in it, is the significance of my own professional habitus and my learning with *whānau*. One end is not framed like the other three sides but open-ended; reflecting how, like the woven nature of *Te Whāriki*, metaphorically, these gaps allow for a 'third space of learning' and a continual, shared and unending path. This could be interpreted as symbolic of the openness in opportunities from digital media such as Twitter. Furthermore, this carving shows the skills necessary in adapting to the learned differences in density and contours of wood. Similarly, in teaching we adapt to individuals' habitus and the educational climate, as every person's contribution in that moment affects the dynamics; just as Twitter gives the user a multitude of rich educational moments that are ever-evolving opportunities to share learning progressions.

Twitter provides inspirational ideas for student-teachers when planning the teaching of a new science topic within the Primary classroom. Other helpful

**Fig. 6.2** Hand-made carving with family significance (photo taken by the authors)

teacher Twitter accounts such as @TeacherToolkit have regular, helpful 'classroom hacks' that provide coping strategies for those important micro-elements of classroom management. For instance, students' pencil-tapping in class can be annoyances that are easily overcome with pertinent correction and BYOD classes are made more effective with suitable digital short-cuts. Likewise, for technology insights that are creative and enthusiastic, TED Talks (@TedTalks) offer innovative replacements for old ideas. With a research-informed international audience, including exclusive educational perspectives, TED Talks are stimulating, informative and research-based. This dynamic adds credibility to what is being shared, and also adds how theory is transformed into practice. As many of the short talks are appropriate for children to watch too, it is another resource to include in the classroom as a lead-in to a topic.

Sonny Bill Williams (@SonnyBWilliams), although most commonly known as a sporting celebrity in rugby, Tweets not only about sportsmanship but also (perhaps surprisingly) inspirational quotes about humility and peace. I have found it beneficial to share the powerful imagery he tweets with students, to show the apparently personal, humble side of a celebrity usually perceived as extraordinary. Like Sonny B. Williams, the people I follow on Twitter in my everyday life, I would not ordinarily be exposed to; their life journeys contrast with my own and yet that is what makes this medium for learning so powerful and meaningful. But it is important to have an element of scepticism about these virtual identities and this is where knowledge of internet safety is an important aspect of not only my own learning, but a fundamental part of my students' lessons. Nevertheless, the images @SonnyBWilliams often shares provide useful triggers for emotive language which can be beneficial to students' thinking and writing. His motivational tweets can also help to build leadership qualities in physical education, particularly to instil a positive inner dialogue for my students. Inevitably, scholarly Twitter accounts such as @britishlibrary and @WaikatoLibrary provide valuable academic information, but it is the *unexpected diversity* from the outputs from some Twitter accounts which provide the contrasting sources that can be so effective to include within my teaching practice.

## Discussion

These perspectives of Twitter provide largely beneficial outcomes for our learning, but these concepts can carry negative connotations too. Bourdieu warned how we are at times 'trapped' in our social worlds. As a post-structuralist, he questions the embedded nature of language and how definitions could be subject to different interpretations, recreating prejudice and inequalities (Bourdieu, 1991). The limitations of characters in every Twitter post can potentially emphasise the risk of misinterpretations (Rich & Miah, 2013). We therefore need to focus on being sensitive to the nuances of language, whilst simultaneously consciously questioning our assumptions. Without this critique of the normalised practice of everyday lives, we risk, in some ways, being products rather than agents of the social world in which we exist, physically and emotionally. So, in the context of learning and supporting others in the learning process, it is imperative that conventions embedded within the expansion and measurement of teaching practices are challenged. Because of the global, diverse and real-time openness of social media like Twitter, it offers some effective ways of identifying and deconstructing these assumptions, as we have shown in our examples in this chapter.

Social interaction – both virtual and otherwise – takes place in different fields which are, in themselves, constantly interacting with each other (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In each field, objectives are set and forms of power through social capital can be played-out. A field can be viewed on a macro basis, that (e.g.) may be the whole of the educational system, or on a more micro level, where the institution may be a field – with its own rules and objectives, or even the (virtual) classroom itself (James & Biesta, 2007). Similarly, a 'newsfeed' from a Twitter profile could be an interpretation of a type of field where public tweets provide an opportunity for an individual's voice to be heard, challenged, influenced and defended. A field may allow for interplay in a game where habitus provides possibilities for reward, in terms of seeking different kinds of social capital or seeking personal recognition (Honneth, 2004; McQueen, 2014). The different pulls within this 'market' are in the potential wins of the players (objects and agents). Likewise it can also incur costs, for example, when individuals are overtly challenged or criticised on Twitter; potentially harming self-esteem. Participants termed 'Trolls' may deliberately break 'netiquette' rules in order to disrupt a social (learning) forum to voice irrelevant, discriminatory, racist, sexist or homophobic views (Safko, 2010). Consequently, Artificial Intelligence designed to assist individuals with management of social media tools can be manipulated by Trolls, causing additional harm (Ohlheiser, 2016). There are always risks to the self when engaging with social media and managing potential solutions to these should be carefully considered and discussed in all learning environments. Nonetheless, the value of Twitter as a constantly evolving learning tool cannot be dismissed when considering the global, inter- and multi-cultural possibilities (Carrigan, 2016).

The interconnectedness of inner and outer aspects of our learning lives cannot be reduced to pedagogical strategies; they are part of the body consciousness,

simultaneously linked to residues of past emotional experiences (Denzin, 1984). The Māori philosophy, which illustrates the multiple and diverse meanings of concepts like *ako* and *whānau* therefore resonate with aspects of the social constructionist theory in a learning cultures approach. In particular, as lecturer and student-teacher, we can see how using metaphor for concepts like *Te Whāriki*, provide an opportunity for enhanced understandings of theoretical educational concepts like professional habitus and for illuminating reasons why Twitter is an effective learning platform.

The relevance of exploring the concept of habitus, through metaphorical thinking which builds understandings of learning processes, provides a context which extends beyond our own lives, into shared cultures. This has profound implications for teaching practice, as can be seen in this quote from American Sociologist Mark Freeman, who reflected on the relevance of his Jewish ancestry when experiencing his first visit to the German city of Berlin:

> But I had carried with me a significant enough store of common knowledge and common imagery as to activate the undercurrents of some of the events witnessed. 'Memory' in this context, becomes a curious amalgamation of fictions, experiences and texts, documentary footage, dramatization, plays, television shows, fantasies and more. (Freeman, 2002, p. 99).

As Freeman hints at above, like art and metaphor, creative fiction can also provide a way that these unspoken aspects of our habitus can be explored. For instance, in the fictional story, *The Bone People*, Keri Hulme creates a sense of place which also carries historical significance, ordinarily unarticulated. The emotions of the protagonist portray a spiritual sense that adds depth to the story and its inherent symbolism of Māori Aotearoa New Zealand culture. The fluid nature of being between past/present alone/together and life/death opens possibilities, just as an awareness of this 'third space' opens up potential for learning through critical thinking. This is especially relevant when we consider educational research which indicates that it is within these spaces of uncertainty and risk that learning is more likely to occur (Roberts, 2013; Williamson, 1998).

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented a philosophical analysis of the relevance of using Twitter as part of a learning cultures approach, within the context of a New Zealand university. Through reflections on our own teaching and learning ethos, we have examined the theoretical concepts from the learning cultures model and provided the metaphorical Māori exemplar of *Te Whāriki* as a way of illuminating the complexities of different worldviews. For example, habitus encompasses not only our individual past experiences and unique background; influences from myths and *whānau*, but also spaces where interactions which are unspoken, present a space for deeper, more personal learning opportunities.

As we have shown through the practical examples included in this chapter, Twitter provides useful pedagogical strategies that support a learning cultures

approach. This is because Twitter can encourage a creative way to learn in a shared community. However, social media communication is not without dangers, and we need to be mindful of how a professional identity is vulnerable to informal interactions of this kind, especially student-teachers who may be inexperienced.

Using Twitter to enhance a learning cultures approach provides students with a realistic reflection of the increasingly fluid boundaries between work, learning and social environments (Brooks et al., 2001). The way we write, the processes and rituals involved in writing and how we perceive texts (and their associated sounds/images) constantly evolves – as do the tools we use to create them. Hence, learning through communication via digital learning skills is intrinsic to our everyday lives, encouraging diversity and equality (Boud, 2009). We are interacting every minute of every day with different kinds of media in different ways and this is how we constantly learn; there is no reason to separate this way of thinking from formal pedagogical strategies.

On a wider, sociological basis, Māori and Pasifika students continue to be under-represented in tertiary education and within senior positions in the workplace (Mahuika et al., 2011). A learning cultures approach is an effective way of sharing and respecting diverse life experiences and therefore forms an opportunity to raise awareness of, and overcome inequalities. Indeed, New Zealand is a multi-cultural society, so the artificial binary of Pākehā and Māori seems increasingly misdirected. Using Twitter as part of a learning cultures approach can therefore offer not only valuable pedagogical tools, but sociological benefits too.

Considering the technological progress made in social media over the past 10 years, it is impossible to guess what new ideas may emerge and how these may impact on the development of teaching and learning. Hence, in support of the Māori concept of *Te Whāriki* and *ako*, individuals could be encouraged to view learning as continual, fluid, *social processes* which are integral to developing meanings and professional identities. Further research is needed into whether this approach could be more broadly applied to other online learning environments and educational sectors.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. Do you use Twitter (or other social media) for your teaching and learning? If so, how effective do you find it? If not, what are the factors which prevent you from using it?
2. What parallels can you make between the Māori ways of knowing described in this chapter and other learning theories you may be familiar with?
3. Were the metaphors used in this chapter useful for reflecting upon your own teaching practice? What other personal metaphors can you describe?

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# Chapter 7
# 'I have Felt the Tears Welling Up': Private Troubles and Public Discussions in the Sociological Classroom

**Pam Lowe**

**Abstract** The sociological imagination requires students to consider the connections between private troubles and public issues. This inevitably means that many of the areas we ask students to consider are sensitive. Issues such as discrimination and inequality are a constant in the curriculum, and degree studies often cover topics such as rape, abortion and death. Yet there is very little discussion of how these sensitive issues impacts on the emotional learning journeys of students or how staff manage teaching and learning of these issues. Focusing on the accounts of staff within a small qualitative research project with students and staff primarily in the West Midlands in the UK, this chapter will illustrate how whilst teaching and learning can be discomforting or distressing, this does not mean we should aim to eliminate negative emotions. It will highlight staff's own emotional labour in their concern and management of students' emotional journeys. Staff foregrounded the need for critical engagement with the literature as a way to manage potentially difficult subjects. The chapter will argue that it is through a constant balance between the emotions and academic activities that staff both recognise and contain the emotional aspects of teaching and learning sensitive issues.

## Introduction

There is a growing interest in the role of emotions as work or as part of the learning experience, and the ways that these may be managed in the classroom. Alongside this there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which taking account of students' emotions in universities is a potential threat to the idea of the objectivity of knowledge, and this has often surfaced in debates around 'trigger' or content warnings. Sociology is one of the disciplines in the forefront on these debates, as it often has an explicit focus on individuals' private troubles, especially those in marginalised communities. This chapter draws from a small project that sought to understand

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how staff and students defined and dealt with sensitive issues and the impact of emotional labour in the classroom. I focus largely on the way that staff sought to manage their own and students' emotions to the subject under consideration, whilst at the same time, trying to maintain a sense of professional objectivity.

## Teaching Sensitive Issues

Much of the social science curriculum has potential to be sensitive, if the material could lead to an emotional response or there are debates as to how to understand the issues involved (Lowe & Jones, 2010). In that sense, it is not really possible to devise a content-based definition of 'sensitive' content, although there are areas more likely to arouse strong emotions than others (Lowe & Jones, 2010). Lowe and Jones (2010) argue that it can be difficult for staff to decide how to address issues, as whatever choices are made students will react differently to the material under discussion. As Mills outlined in his classic description of the role of the sociological; connecting your personal troubles with those of individuals in the same circumstance is both a 'terrible lesson' and a 'magnificent one' (Mills, 1967, p. 5).

This notion that personal knowledge and experience is significant within sociology education is central and we regularly ask students to rethink aspects of their identity, experiences or beliefs about the world. All decisions about topic material and classroom approaches will have an effect on students whether positive or negative (Housee, 2010). Moreover, the identity and experiences of staff is an intrinsic part of the framework of classroom learning, and no matter how it is approached, it will also shape the learning experience (Gill & Worley, 2010). Hence, staff identity and expertise forms a crucial dynamic to the classroom experience and the ways in which private issues are connected to broader knowledge.

Although there is a growing recognition of teaching as a form of emotional labour, much of the focus has been on school teachers rather than higher education (Duckworth, Lord, Dunne, Atkins, & Watmore, 2016; Hagenauer & Volet 2014). Emotional labour as a concept was developed by Hochschild (1983) and describes how 'feeling' management is part of the labour process. Central elements to emotional labour include face-to-face encounters that require the employee to manage the emotions of others within a workplace that decides what suitable emotions should be exhibited by worker and 'customer' (Hochschild, 1983). Constanti and Gibbs (2004) argue that teaching staff in higher education meet these criteria as they are expected to ensure student satisfaction as well as contributing to the wider financial success of their university.

Beard, Clegg, and Smith (2007) argue that there has been a tendency to overlook the affective in higher education but learning can be enhanced if this is properly considered. Yet as Hagenauer and Volet (2014) have pointed out, little research to date has looked at 'emotion-triggering' issues within teaching practice. They found a number of key areas that university staff identified as emotionally significant. Staff believed that passion and enthusiasm were an intrinsic part of

teaching, yet the emotions experienced by staff were always in relation to the students they were teaching (Hagenauer & Volet 2014). Hence, different emotions were experienced depending on the success or otherwise of the students' learning activities. Their study also found that staff had less confidence and certainly at the beginning of their teaching careers. Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) found similar trends, although in their study university staff who identified more as researchers than teachers were less likely to see teaching as emotional and more likely to report negative rather than positive emotions.

The focus of emotions within teaching and learning has been a matter of some debate (e.g. Ecclestone, Hayes, & Furedi, 2005; Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Ecclestone et al. (2005) have argued that focusing on emotional well-being risks undermining the student's learning by diminishing opportunities to challenge students thinking or properly assessing their work. In many public arenas, this debate has often focused on the extent to which 'trigger warnings' are a threat to university education. Rather than just being seen as alerting students to content that might upset them, some 'trigger warnings' are seen as a way of curtailing academic freedom. For example, an article in the *New York Times* (2014) contained quotations that suggested that they set up a 'chilling environment' in which staff would feel reluctant to include material in case it led to student complaints.

This critique resonates with Furedi (2003), who criticises the growing public management of emotions within a broader 'therapy culture'. He argues that this requires not just a focus on emotions, but also a reduction in the range of acceptable emotions. Furedi states 'in some cases the demand to curb strong passion could mean pressurising people to tolerate appalling acts of injustice and oppression' (2003, p. 198). Whilst it is clear that a focusing on 'enhancing' student emotions, particularly at a time in which there is such an emphasis on student satisfaction, could lead to pressure to reduce or withdraw some sensitive issues from the curriculum, it is not clear that recognition of emotion *automatically* undermines critical engagement.

For Leathwood and Hey 'the academy has been constructed as the paradigmatic site of pure rationality devoted to the dispassionate and objective search for truth' (2009, p. 429). This, they argue, is built on a gendered construction in which rational/mind/masculinity are seen as the opposite to emotion/body/femininity (Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Leathwood and Hey (2009) argue it is only through rejecting the dichotomy of emotion/reason and 'working with' emotion that full recognition of social injustice can be achieved. This is at the heart of feminist pedagogy that has long used affective engagement as a way of highlighting injustice (Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Roberts (2013) goes further than this and suggests that despair is a likely outcome of education as it will develop understandings of suffering both of ourselves and others. He argues that whilst teaching and learning should be enjoyable, this is not the same thing as aiming for happiness.

Amsler (2011) points out that taking the affect seriously does not necessarily mean teaching students how to feel, nor emphasising student satisfaction and well-being over critical engagement. She argues that a central element within critical pedagogy is enabling students to *understand* their emotions in relation to subject

material and to question why these exist and what alternatives are possible. Indeed as I have argued elsewhere (Lowe, 2015), students believe that sensitive issues are a critical component of good social science education even when they report that it can be distressing and discomforting. Beard et al. (2007) argue if staff had more awareness of the emotional impact of learning, this would enhance pedagogical practice. Indeed as Tarc (2013) has argued, emotions seep into learning whether or not it is believed to be warranted.

In response to this growing recognition of the role of emotions, there has been calls for staff to be emotionally intelligent (Mortiboys, 2005). Mortiboys (2005) argues that the emotionally intelligent lecturer is able to recognise and respond to emotions in the classroom and can manage the emotions of students to facilitate learning. However, as Robson and Bailey (2009) have argued, an emphasis on emotional intelligence is not the same as recognising the emotional labour of teaching staff. Whereas the former focuses on skills needed to enhance performance, the latter requires the suppression or management of staff feelings to ensure appropriate display and to encourage a 'proper' emotional display in students. As many commentators have argued, the emotional labour of staff is not often institutionally recognised and is often gendered (Koster, 2011; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Morely, 1998). Staff are often left emotionally drained (Morley, 1998), having to develop their own coping mechanisms (Koster, 2011) or developing role strain (Hayes-Smith, Richards, & Branch, 2010). As work pressures increase within higher education, so does the need to perform emotional labour (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). These pressures may be heightened when dealing with sensitive issues and a better understanding of staff experience is therefore necessary.

## Methodology

This project recruited staff and students from both pre- and post-1992 universities primarily in the Midlands, UK to investigate the experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues. Ethical approval was given through the Aston University Ethics Committee. This chapter focuses on the issues raised by the teaching staff. The staff taught on a wide range of modules. All of them addressed issues of identity, inequality and discrimination (such as ethnicity, sexism and homophobia) and most of them also took classes that covered other sensitive issues such as rape, abortion and terrorism.

Recruitment of the staff was purposeful and it sought to include staff at different grades and length of time working in higher education. The initial plan was to recruit from two different disciplines, but as the fieldwork started, a broader range of staff were included as the students recruited to the project were studying a more diverse range of subjects. In total, 10 lecturing staff from 7 universities participated, of which 5 taught sociology and the others taught social work, psychology, English language, business and politics. All of the staff in other disciplines were teaching issues relevant to the sociological curriculum. The sample included two professors, one reader, two senior lecturers, three lecturers and two staff employed

on hourly paid teaching contracts. Four staff were at pre-1992 universities and six taught at post-1992 institutions. Nine of the semi-structured interviews were face-to-face with one carried out by telephone. In total, eight women and two men participated, with three staff from minority-ethnic backgrounds.

The fieldwork mainly took place in private rooms on university campuses, with one interview conducted in a quiet space in a cafe. Participants were asked about their experiences of teaching sensitive issues, how they managed their own and student emotions and for examples of when classes had worked well, as well as when things had not gone according to plan. Consent was given to audio-record all the interviews and these were fully transcribed. A thematic analysis assisted by NVIVO was used following the steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation of the data through close reading, developing a coding framework from the data, and looking for similarities in the codes to form themes. The quotations included are ones that best illustrate the themes under discussion. As a small qualitative project the findings are not generalizable, but nevertheless do illustrate similarities of experience that may occur more widely.

## Learning Is Painful

The title of this chapter is taken from a student's account of encountering sensitive material, whilst studying sociology and reflects acknowledgement from all participants that learning could be a difficult journey. However, what was interesting in the fieldwork was that although many of the staff explicitly spoke of students as undergoing an emotional journey, their descriptions of their own emotional learning journeys in relation to teaching were not as openly recognised. This section will begin by discussing how staff described the student's journeys before contrasting them to their own.

## Emotional Learning

Many staff talked of a potential transformative effect of social science education and they described encountering sensitive issues as a necessary part of this. This was similar to the accounts of the students (Lowe, 2015, also see Beard et al. 2007). In relation to issues of identity, staff spoke about how difficult it was for many students to have to deconstruct issues that they thought of as certainties and question aspects of themselves and their experiences in a way that they had never needed to before. Staff recognised the emotional impact of this:

If transformative learning is about changing the way we look at the world and look at ourselves and the world, then that's going to be a painful process. Erm and I think that the job of a teacher is to enable people to go through some of that painful process. (Social work)

A real emphasis in that module [critical discourse] is on, you know, challenging stereotypes and challenging discrimination and inequalities and so on. And

looking at this, this idea of identity being performed and constructed (…) you've basically got to abandon everything you probably believe in at the moment and really open yourselves up (English Language).

Some students were more comfortable in addressing these issues than others and staff recounted difficult moments in the classroom when students became upset at positions that challenged their understanding of the world. For example, two participants spoke of minority-ethnic students being unhappy at ethnicity being theorised as a social construction and another informant described the homophobia encountered when teaching sexuality.

Staff were conscious that there was a need to think about particular topic areas, but acknowledged that you could not necessarily plan for all eventualities. For example, care could be taken if the topic to be examined was planned to be sexual violence, but sometimes these issues would emerge through discussion in a way that had not been considered:

> We might think of something like abusive relationships as sensitive, but I could be talking to someone about car ownership, they could tell you a story of how their partner keeps control of the car and doesn't let them use it. (…) I guess there are some things that we're more likely to think of as difficult. Or difficult for some people, but then again, anybody could be upset by anything we talk about. (Sociology, informant 3)

Yet despite the recognition that a range of negative emotions were possible, staff were still strong in their belief that covering sensitive issues was a necessary part of their programmes. Whilst this was present in all disciplines, the sociology staff articulated this most explicitly:

> It's so powerful (…) it should come with a health warning, a political health warning. (…) I remember [*as a student]* the rage, the outrage of making the connections about my mum being poor being a girl (…) when I finally made those connections, and I did through sociology I was so angry (…) sociology itself, if it doesn't touch you then you haven't read it properly. (…) we need to recognise the emotion, the emotional component. (Sociology, informant 1)

In all of the accounts, staff saw the role of emotions as central to questioning and transforming students' understandings. They recognised that students were on an emotional journey but one that had the potential for transformation. In other words, they were using emotions to develop critical understanding in line with critical pedagogical ideas (Amsler, 2011). Yet as they recognised that learning could be painful, they need a method to exercise some control, a way to try to contain emotions to levels that they were comfortable dealing with. Before I discuss how this was done, the parallel emotional journeys of staff learning to teach will be considered.

## Emotional Teaching

All of the staff described emotional labour as a key component of their roles, although none of them named it as such – which is surprising given the widespread use of this concept within social sciences. Staff worried about how to get things

right in the classroom and how to manage the emotions of their students in relation to the topics being studied. Staff spoke of 'constantly scanning the kind of landscape' (social work) and stated that they 'keep checking' with students (sociology, informant 2) by asking what they felt about particular material being used. Many staff explicitly stated that students could excuse themselves from certain classes and gave choices within assessment so that students could avoid certain topic areas. The approaches did vary depending on whether or not the modules were core or optional, as many staff felt that if chosen as an option, students should be prepared to engage more deeply with the material. Hence, managing the emotions of students was recognised by the participants as a fundamental part of their teaching role.

Many of the staff accounts recalled specific incidents when things became difficult in teaching situations. Hughes, Huston, and Stein (2011) describe these type of events as 'hot' moments in the classroom, and argues that there is very little training given to staff as to how to deal with the situation. This lack of training and support was reflected in the accounts of many of the participants. For example, one lecturer described her first attempt to teach a class looking at theories on terrorism:

> So we approached it from, well, 'how do academics approach terrorism?' (…) and we had our discussion and that's when sort of the 'wheels fell off the bus' so-to-speak. And this really surprised me because I wasn't prepared for that and nowhere in any of the teaching manual or advice does it say how to deal with these things, and what surprised me is that the students became very passionate about this, but passionate in a way that I didn't really expect. (Politics)

She described how some students started to speak of conspiracy theories around US interests and 9/11 and that she struggled to get the class back to the material they needed to study. This situation was compounded by a complete absence of effective support from her institution. At the time, she was participating in a teacher-training course and when she asked for advice, they told her that an effective solution would have been to write the issue on a post-it-note and park it on the board to be dealt with later. It was not clear to her what this would achieve either emotionally or pedagogically, especially given the sensitivity of terrorism as a topic at universities (see Miller, Mills, & Harkins, 2011). Nor did it give this informant confidence in being able to teach this topic and she removed it from the syllabus. This was not the only case where participants reported that generic teacher-training courses in their institutions had failed to support them in how to approach the challenges posed by teaching sensitive material.

Despite the centrality to their teaching, none of the staff had encountered any professional development activities to help them enhance their practice in this area. A few mentioned that they were able to discuss the issues raised with colleagues, but this was far from universal. It was more common for staff to indicate that it was trying things out and confidence gained over time that had helped them learn ways of teaching sensitive issues. For example:

> You learn as you go on. I think I have been teaching now since 1997. So at the beginning I was just awful (…) and the PGCE doesn't help you teach these things, it is basically trial and error. You do something that doesn't work (…) and you can see that they *(students)* looked really uncomfortable. So over time you should just steer away from something that you think you can't cope with and actually they can't in the same way. (Business)

> Yeah I think as I've got more confident, I've learnt the tricks of the trade. So I think with time and being confident with the, just the sociological issues, whether they're sensitive issues that I raise. I've tried to make them more fun and every day. And I think that only comes with time, you know? (Sociology, informant 2)

As I have argued elsewhere (Lowe, 2015) development over time is an important part of student's gaining knowledge and confidence when learning about sensitive issues. What is apparent in the staff accounts is that the emotional journeys for the early years of teaching staff are strikingly similar to those of the students (Lowe, 2015). Yet within the interviews, most of the staff recognised the need to manage and support students' emotional journeys in much greater depth than their own. One of the most significant ways that they managed student's emotions was from trying to retain the notion of academic objectivity in class.

## Literature Is Safe

As they recognised that teaching and learning sensitive issues was an emotional process for students, staff needed to find a way to manage and contain emotions within the classroom. The most important way that they used to manage this was by ensuring that the topics under discussion were dealt with through an academic approach. Hence, students were expected to read the published literature and critically engage with the debates. Many of the staff spoke of how it was through this academic approach that the emotions could be effectively managed as the following quotations illustrate:

> Making sense of that [*personal experiences*] within the sociological arena, especially stuff that people might have left buried somewhere. I do think because of the nature of what we do as sociologists, I do think that there is a strong link to the individual and individual experiences. (…) I still have to be supportive even if it is something I completely disagree with, I've still got to support the student's learning experience (…) I tend to go back to the research because I think that is an authoritative space to operate from. (Sociology, informant 5)

> They have a [*assessment*] framework there and it is a safe framework. Because the account they are constructing or producing isn't unmediated i.e. they're not just blurting it out in an emotional way (…) think about how it related to their academic learning. (Psychology)

The two quotations above illustrate how important staff felt *academic* understandings could be a way of controlling emotions. In the first account, the informant uses the literature as a way to both validate the experiences of some students and potentially challenge the views of others. Using the literature can both authenticate and dismiss students' reactions to material being studied, but importantly the dismissal is impersonal rather than directly challenging. Hence, there is a containment of emotions rather than an unmediated flow. The second quotation illustrates a similar approach, in this case in relation to assessment. The task asks students to reflect on their personal experiences but these need to be contextualised in the literature. In this way the informant aims to enhance their learning by acknowledging students'

emotions but limiting their expression. Both of these participants are trying to work with student's emotional response academically in order to both protect students from being overwhelmed or feeling undermined. By moving the private issues into an academic debate, the emotions can be contained.

Another informant spoke of similar actions, but went further in presenting an account of how literature made the issues safe:

> And it protects people, I think. If you bring it back to the literature it protects, it helps keep people safe. (…) What I mean is, speaking solely from personal experience can expose students, it's also just their experience. It's just this balancing act all of the time between, inviting and appreciating their personal experiences and keeping it on topic. It's about research which shows there are groups of people who experience duh duh duh and so I try and bring it back to that and *I feel that that protects me*. (Sociology, informant 1 *my emphasis*)

In this case the public debate of literature is a way to both contain discussion and offers protection from some of the emotional sides of learning. In another part of this interview, this informant stressed the importance of remembering that classes are 'not therapy'.

This recognition that teaching is 'not therapy' is a critical point. Whilst staff recognised and wanted to plan for any potential emotional impact of teaching and learning sensitive issues, there were clear limits to this. Although staff recognised that emotions were ever-present, they were aware that the public classroom was not an ideal place to unpack strong emotional reactions. Although staff would often talk to students outside of classes if they were distressed, this was often used as a signposting exercise as to more appropriate services such as university counselling services. All of the staff interviewed were clear about the need for boundaries when offering support, and whilst they would be sympathetic to the student's distress, they tried to ensure they did not attempt to be therapeutic.

Staff recognised that the topics studied would resonate or challenge students emotionally and it was important to staff to contain or limit the emotions of students. Although they agreed with Roberts (2013) of the importance of negative emotions such as despair, this is not the same as dealing with tearful or angry students in the classroom. The way that they sought to manage this was to emphasis rather than reduce the core academic process. The idea of the rational university and the importance of critical thinking are harnessed to deal with a risk of unmediated emotions. This then helped staff limit the extent of emotional labour that staff needed to perform.

## Emotional Objectivity?

> When I first started teaching I hated, not hated, hated is a very strong word, I'd like to have avoided provoking emotion. Cos I think when you start teaching, you are not prepared to deal with that. I think the more you do it, the more you want to see a reaction from students. To, because I think you know then it has sunk in (…) they get drawn into it, and because they're exploring the subject themselves, you know, they're starting to go onto feel various emotions as they go on a process of realisation. (Sociology, informant 4)

This extract (above) clearly illustrates the themes that have been illustrated so far. It shows staff recognition that studying sensitive issues is an emotional journey for students and it is through engaging with the material that students come to understand the issues more fully. It also illustrates that when learning to teach, staff undertake their own emotional journey which gives them confidence in their emotional labour. Hence, it is through the emotional labour of staff that students are given the opportunity to critically reflect on their feelings to enhance the academic study of sensitive issues.

Curzon-Hobson (2009) argues that the critical stance should be the fundamental aim of higher education. The critical stance, as he defines it, is a specific way of encountering and pursing knowledge that leads to an emphasis on openness, reflexivity and doubt using dialogical enquiry within learning relationships in the pursuit of knowledge. Curzon-Hobson states that:

> This kind of pedagogy requires teachers to develop attributes of respect, care, courage and empathy, for they must be willing to show students that their own understandings are fragile and incomplete, that they can, want and need to listen to students' interpretations, and that their growth is also subject to the growth of those around them (2003, p. 211).

This is the heart of critical pedagogy in which it is through dialogue and partnerships that biography, emotion and political understanding are used to question what can and cannot be known or said (Amsler, 2011).

In contrast, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, p. 97) have asserted that an 'emphasis on the emotions in higher education is irrelevant, a time-wasting activity based on a generalised notion of personal vulnerability'. They argue that regardless of how emotional the work is, it must not influence the intellectual work, as 'disinterest' is central to the knowledge production. They further argue that whilst emotions may be present in teaching and learning, the knowledge itself is, and should be, without emotion. I would argue that, in practice, is it not possible to always separate emotional bodies from the rational mind, nor is it necessarily desirable to try. For example, whilst some victims of child sexual abuse may be able to debate its moral position in a way that is completely separate to their experience, expecting everyone to be able to do this is unrealistic and potentially unethical.

Indeed, given the stress on the wellbeing of research participants during the production of knowledge, it seems extraordinary not to have any consideration for students studying that knowledge. For example, in a similar way to other ethical codes, the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice states:

> Sociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. (BSA, 2002, p. 2)

Whilst clearly it is possible that some research is limited or not carried out because of the need to consider the wellbeing of participants, in the main, I would argue that this is not seen as completely incompatible with academic knowledge production. Instead, ethical codes are designed to ensure that we recognise that in order to do research we should consider how to mitigate adverse impacts. Considering

how this knowledge impacts on our students when we ask them to study it seems to be in line with this ethical framework.

Moreover, many staff are in higher education *because* they are passionate about an area of study. For example:

> I think I get quite emotional (…) I think I get quite enthusiastic and animated and adamant about certain issues. (…) I say look I'm not an objective bystander. You will realise very quickly I have a particular political persuasion. (Business)

The extent to which academics more generally should be 'neutral' in their research as well as their teaching, is outside the scope of this chapter. However, the idea that 'objectivity' is at the heart of either knowledge production or knowledge transfer clearly has its roots in specific understandings of the rational academy (Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Moreover, as Thompson (2004) has shown, there are always limits to critical thinking; it can never be completely context-free.

Consequently, the strategies of staff working with students' emotions to enhance their knowledge and understanding seem entirely consistent with an ethics of care for research participants. The emphasis on published research upholds both the tradition of the rationality within universities (Curzon-Holder, 2009) and yet, as Amsler (2011) argues also recognises issues, and the wider world, as a site of inequality and injustice which is embodied and experienced through emotion. Yet as I have shown, this is only possible through the emotional labour of staff, who are often left unsupported in this role. Moreover, as Constanti and Gibbs (2004) have argued, this lack of institutional recognition of emotional labour results in voluntary exploitation of staff as they exercise care over their students.

Staff need to develop protective mechanisms which limits the emotional labour exerted and they do this through returning to academic texts. The staff interviewed believed that reading and thinking academically channels students' emotions into intellectual pursuits, containing private troubles in any public debate. In this way, they were acknowledging the despair produced through education (Roberts, 2013) but could limit its public display. Staff felt that this helps both the students' engagement and it is a safe way for staff to manage the subject in the classroom. It provides a critical distance between staff and students and validates their professional identity as lecturers. Consequently, it is through developing this balance between emotions and objectivity that staff manage to deal with sensitive issues in the classroom.

## Conclusion

All the staff participants in this project recognised and sought to manage the potential emotional impact of private issues in the public arena of the classroom, yet they often felt unsupported in learning how to do this. As they are learning to teach, staff also undergo their own emotional learning journey, which has many parallels to students in relation to gaining knowledge, understanding and

confidence in teaching sensitive issues. Far from undermining academic practice, or introducing therapeutic education, their understanding of the emotion journeys of students is rooted in critical engagement with the subject material. Teaching and learning sensitive issues will always bring private troubles into public discussion, but through seeking to achieve a balance between emotional elements and academic objectivity, staff both recognise and contain both students emotional reactions and their own emotional labour.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. Do you feel that teaching is a type of emotional labour and, if so, list some ways that you attempt to 'manage it'.
2. Is considering students' emotions problematic or a necessary part of teaching private troubles?
3. Do we need to develop formal ethical codes for teaching – similar to those we use in research? Create a mind-map of what types of support and/or training would be helpful for staff in these situations.

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# Chapter 8
# Pedagogy of Laughter: Using Humor to Make Teaching and Learning More Fun and Effective

**Laura L. Ellingson**

**Abstract** This chapter reviews current interdisciplinary scholarship to highlight some possibilities of using humor to enhance teaching and learning. Integrating into the university classroom respectful, appropriate humor uplifts and engages students, while avoiding hurtful or aggressive humor. Using personal examples from my own teaching career, I illustrate how humor can be used to help students to reflect on topics about which they may feel defensive or disinterested, to engage more enthusiastically with learning activities and exercises, and to foster open communication in the classroom.

## Introduction

American industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie famously said, "There is little success where there is little laughter," and as a professor I have taken his words to heart. Years of teaching courses feared by many students, such as public speaking and research methods, have inspired me to embrace humor as a primary mode of engaging students in difficult, frightening, seemingly irrelevant, or otherwise unappealing material. In this chapter, I review current scholarship from education, psychology, and communication on the positive effects of humor and laughter on teaching and learning. I then offer concrete strategies based on my own experiences for integrating into the university classroom respectful, appropriate humor that uplifts and engages students (and myself), while avoiding hurtful, denigrating humor. In particular, I describe how humor can be used to help students to reflect on topics about which they may feel defensive, to make application exercises more appealing, and to foster open communication between instructor and students.

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## Learning and Humor

Learning is not just an intake of information but a complex process that happens in contexts imbued with culture, values, and norms (Hoad, Deed, & Lugg, 2013). Thus, learning processes are not merely a matter of the logical mind but "simultaneously socially constructed, cognitive, embodied, and affective" (Hoad et al., 2013, p. 39). The deliberate, strategic incorporation of humor in teaching students of all ages is frequently justified by educators with reference to Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner posits that learners possess a range of nine different intelligences, including: verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential. All individuals develop stronger capacities in some intelligences than in others. Of course, some detractors suggest that Gardner's theory is reductionist and "therapeutic" (Ecclestone, Hayes, & Furedi, 2005). Nonetheless, even if the theory is not helpful in regarding issues of emotional intelligence and self-esteem in education, it still offers a useful heuristic for envisioning a myriad of ways in which instructors and students can engage with materials by appealing to different senses, modes of sense making, and forms of expression.

Given the tremendous variation in strengths of multiple and intersecting intelligences, all teaching contexts challenge instructors to accommodate the heterogeneous learning styles and preferences among students. When strategizing on how to engage students, instructors should attempt to tap into more than one mode of experiencing the world. Humor can tap into combinations of intelligences and can be one of a number of strategies employed to vary the intelligences addressed by pedagogies in each class session (Smith & Noviello, 2012). The theme of this book is teaching with sociological imagination, and one vital aspect of instructor's imaginative capacities is definitely humor.

Humor is a natural part of human life (Martin, 2007), including both humor creation and humor appreciation (Inglis, Zach, & Kaniel, 2014). Like other educators, I take an inclusive approach to understanding humor, embracing the following flexible, inclusive definition:

> Humor may be broadly defined as the quality of being amusing or comic; the ability to make other people laugh. In a context of higher education... humor more specifically refers to a professor's use of amusing or comic words, actions, or reactions while instructing, engaging, and interacting with students, managing her classroom, and/or setting a tone for timely and appropriate mirthful response to content or activities. (Lovorn, Augustine, & Dutton, 2015, p. 1)

Tone and mood surface as primarily rationales for promoting humor in teaching. Argues one researcher, "humor is not about telling jokes and not essentially about getting laughs. Humor is fundamentally about a mood of lightness that facilitates learning" as a way to counter stress, anxiety, fear, disengagement (Strean, 2011, p. 189). Not all humor is the same. Research demonstrates the multidimensional nature of instructional humor; humor can function to exert positive social influence, disparage and reinforce social isolation, or enhance coping in stressful

circumstances (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). Humor orientation can be considered to be a communication-based personality trait; the higher an individual is in humor orientation, the more likely they are to enact humorous messages and perceive themselves as successfully funny in many contexts (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007). Thus, some instructors will be more oriented to humor than others, and of course some students will be more receptive and responsive than others as well. Experienced instructors have been found to use more instructional humor than their less experienced ones, indicating that those with more teaching proficiency recognize the value of humor, have practiced ways to effectively incorporate it in the classroom, and may have developed confidence in their ability to improvise humor (Banas et al., 2011). Successful use of humor involves not overdoing the frequency of humor and using humor that is relevant to the course to help clarify course concepts.

Use of humor is widely believed to have generalized benefits to students and instructors (Garner, 2006). Humor in the classroom helps "plant memories" for students, enhances coping skills, encourages engagement, attracts attention, neutralizes stress, increases students' valuing of instructors, enhances creativity, facilitates communication, supports change processes, and helps make teaching enjoyable and even joyful (Morrison & Quest, 2012). Moreover, "humor may provide a catalyst for alleviating anxieties, thus breaking down social barriers, diffusing conflict, empowering individuals, and creating a sense of community through shared experience" (Hoad et al., 2013, p. 44). Instructional Humor Processing Theory suggests that instructional humor increases learning when the humorous message is both relevant to the material being learned and appropriate (i.e., not offensive or hurtful, suitable for classroom culture) (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). The theory posits that students associate positive emotional response with learning and acquire more positive attitudes toward education, which in turn increases their motivation to learn and results in improved academic performance.

More specifically, research supports that strategic use of humor in classrooms may: increase student retention of content (Garner, 2006), at least at the knowledge and comprehension levels, if not the application level (Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2012); increase student enjoyment of the learning experience (Garner, 2006); enhance sense of immediacy/closeness between student and teacher (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015; Hackathorn et al., 2012; Strean, 2011); increase motivation toward learning (Banas et al., 2011); motivate students discussion participation and promote a positive online learning environment (Anderson, 2011). Importantly for academic careers, strategic use of humor may also increase student positive evaluation of instructors (Banas et al., 2011; Makewa, Role, & Genga, 2011) and help prevent teacher burnout (Ramsey, Knight, Knight, & Verdón, 2011). Given the increased reliance on (and exploitation of) adjunct faculty, as well as pressures on tenure-track faculty to be increasingly research productive and attain teaching excellence simultaneously, student evaluations have become one of several performance indicators that may directly impact instructors' abilities to obtain and retain academic positions (Cross & Goldenberg, 2011). Engaging teaching through a lens of play, humor, and fun

rather than always framing it as (more) work may help instructors to make their day-to-day lives in academia more enjoyable and satisfying (Ellingson, 2013).

At the same time, instructors must be wary of the potential downfalls of using humor in our classrooms. People have differing senses of humor and perceptions of what is funny, and instructor humor needs to be appropriate, professional, and germane to the topic at hand (Garner, 2006). When humor is used negatively to disparage students, this can cause embarrassment, anger, and alienation and contribute to a hostile classroom climate (Banas et al., 2011; Hoad et al., 2013). Even well-intentioned teasing can fail because of the power differential between instructor and students (Banas et al., 2011), and I caution instructors to tread very, very carefully in this area, erring on the side of caution. That said, once relationships have been established and goodwill is flowing in the classroom, I do sometimes gently poke fun at students' appreciation of certain aspects of current pop culture and their loyalties to sports teams. For example, as a life-long fan of the Boston Red Sox baseball team (I was born near Boston, Massachusetts), I successfully tease fans of the baseball teams located in the San Francisco Bay area where I now live—the San Francisco Giants and Oakland A's—especially during the fall playoff season. This seems to be received as good-natured rivalry, and students (particularly men) will generally "talk trash" back to me about my team, to the amusement of the whole class. Still, I concur with scholars that it is generally safer to make oneself the object of humor, laughing at oneself first and foremost, and never being mean-spirited, especially toward students.

## Humorous Pedagogies

Instructors should use humor they feel comfortable with, avoid negative or disparaging humor, and ensure the humor is appropriate for their student audience. To aid in comprehension and retention, the humor should relate directly to a concept just explained, and then the instructor ideally should clarify the meaning following the humor (Banas et al., 2011). I came across some evidence that warns that planned humor is less effective than spontaneous humor that arises out of a particular time and place, and the authors warned that forced-sounding humor will likely not work (Hovelynck & Peeters, 2003). While that may be, that does not mean that instructors cannot deliberately work to craft particular moments in the classroom so that they will be ripe for humor, that is, setting oneself up for successful incorporation of humor. I make certain jokes and witty comments every time I teach certain topics that I teach over and over again each term, and the joking works well because it is the first time it has been heard by each group of students and because I truly enjoy the humor so it does not sound stale or forced.

Next I offer specific ideas for incorporating humor into higher education classrooms within the opening day of class presentation, the use of the "call and response" speaking pattern, inclusion of toys and other material objects, and the use of humorous illustrations and objects of analysis such as video clips. I intend

these as beginnings or jumping-off points for instructors to consider and reflect on what would work with their own personalities, teaching styles, and course topics.

## Opening Day Monologue

As seasoned instructors know, the first day of class is an important opportunity to set students' expectations, establish instructor credibility, and begin to form a supportive learning environment (Gaffney & Whitaker, 2015). Over twenty years of teaching, I have developed a repertoire of humorous catch phrases and ways of expressing standard opening day information for my students in each new course. I continually fine tune both my delivery and my remarks, but I have established several key points (these vary depending upon the course) that I deliver with as much humor as possible. My reasoning is simple: why be boring? Why not make information and basic explanations as much fun as possible? I bring notes, just enough to keep me on point and make sure my punch lines are clear, but not enough that I am reading word-for-word from my notes. I offer a few examples of this strategy that instructors could use as inspiration for their own opening day presentations.

First, I address one of my idiosyncrasies. I tend to talk very fast, which I assume results from a combination of my high caffeine consumption, natural inclination, growing up in the Northeastern region of the USA (where faster talking is more typical than in other regions of the country), and extensive training as a collegiate policy debater, a form of competitive debate with timed speeches that encouraged rapid delivery. I want to let my students know two things: that I am aware that I have this general tendency but don't tend to notice it in the moment that I do it, and second, that it is perfectly acceptable for them to ask me to slow down or to repeat information, and that it will not anger or embarrass me if they do so. So one of my stock bits of humor goes something like this:

> "I know I tend to talk waaaaay too fast. I was a debater in college, and I was trained to speak in excess of 300 words per minute. And I married a guy from my debate squad—how geeky is that, right?—and so I don't have to slow down at home. And the more excited I get, the faster I speak. I realize this is probably inconceivable to you, but I LOVE talking about research methods and epistemology [or whatever the course topic is], and I get SO excited that I speed up and up and up [I'm speeding up my voice as I say this, smiling]. I promise that if I'm going too fast for you to follow, then I'm definitely going too fast for others. So feel free to ask me to slow down or just to look panicked and wave your hand at me, and I'll get the message. I promise I won't get upset at you, nor I will draw little frowny-faces next to your name in my grade book."

Delivered in a playful tone, this always draws laughs and seems to reassure students that they can respond to me on this issue without retribution.

Second, I use humor to address uncomfortable, face-threatening identity issues, that is, the discussion of which may be embarrassing, offensive, or hurtful to some students. Because I teach a lot of courses on gender and sexuality, I "come out" to my students about being a feminist and deal upfront with the anxiety, discomfort, and occasional outright hostility that my political commitments spark in students,

very few of whom share my identity as a proud feminist. Instead of dealing with this topic defensively, I joke about it. Here is my standard opening gambit:

> "The next thing we need to talk about is that we will be using the f-word quite a bit in this class, and I want to address this right upfront so that we can talk about any discomfort that you may have about this word. I know you have all heard the f-word before, in the media or perhaps among your friends. Well, we are going to be using the f-word *a lot* this term. That's right! And the f-word is, of course, *feminist*. Yes, it's true; I am a feminist. That means that I believe in the political, social, and economic equality of the sexes. For the record, it does not mean that I hate men. I actually like quite a large number of men—I even have one at home!"

Of course, my students think that "f-word" is a euphemism for a commonly used piece of profanity, and I always surprise a laugh out of them when I make the controversial f-word "feminist" instead. And I explain my type of feminism and use an exaggerated, faux seriousness when I say "for the record." I then to go on to reference the "This is what a feminist looks like" campaign and point out that many of them share some of my core beliefs, even if they have not reflected before on the meanings of this label or do not embrace the label for themselves.

Third, I humorously address students' reluctance to enroll in (and even fear of) required courses in theory, research methods, or cultural diversity. I address this tension by letting students know that I am fully aware of their reluctance to take a particular course, that I do not blame them for feeling as they do, and that I plan to help them have a pleasant and productive experience:

> "Next, I realize that none of you are volunteering to take research methods, but are here only because the course is required for your academic major. I don't blame you for not being particularly interested in research methods, but here's the thing: I LOVE this stuff. I know—crazy, right? But I really do. I actually volunteer to teach this course; it's not a punishment from the dean for being a bad professor. I *want* to be here with you on this *fabulous voyage of discovery*! I had a student once say to me at the end of this course, 'Well, Dr. E., that wasn't nearly as horrible as I thought it would be!' And that's my goal for us this term; that it will not be nearly as horrible as you fear. Even if you don't learn to be as geeky as I am and really love this stuff, I'm going to do my best to make this as fun and painless as possible. And I promise it won't be truly horrible."

In this way, I let students know that I am well aware of their reluctance and, in some cases, anxiety, and let us all laugh together while I assure them that they can handle the course material. I use humor to frame myself as their ally, rather than their enemy. All three of these topics I address humorously during my first day of each course demonstrate how brief, witty statements can be incorporated into mundane explanations and how to use humor to frame difficult or unappealing topics in a way that encourages students to feel understood by and bonded to their instructor.

## Call and Response

Another humorous teaching strategy that I use to great effect is a variation on the traditional African-American communicative tradition of "call and response" (Boone, 2003), a "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker

and listener in which all of the statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104). The most common example of this tradition is of preachers who ask their church congregations to whom they are speaking to respond with an "amen," "halleluiah," or other way of indicating enthusiastic engagement with a message. This technique has also been used in a variety of other communicative contexts, such as rap and hip hop music (Hadley & Yancy, 2012). The key to this technique is to teach the students the word or phrase at least three times before asking them to repeat it. Also, be sure to issue the prompt with great enthusiasm, inviting them to be in on the joke.

For example, I stress all term the important of critically reflecting on one's standpoint as a researcher (e.g., race, age, socioeconomic class, gender, as well as life experiences relevant to the topic of study). I make the point over and over again that this is not an attempt to "reduce bias" in a positivist, scientific sense of reducing the shameful contamination of our research by pretending to be objective. Instead, it is a process of embracing reflexivity to improve the validity and richness of interpretations by understanding the intersection of a researcher's self with the people and context under investigation. Each time I mention this issue, I add with great vocal emphasis, "and we do *not* apologize for our standpoints!" After I point out an instance where the researcher's standpoint sheds some light on research findings, I ask the class with mock indignation, "And do we apologize for this?" The first few times, I answer my own question, "No, we do not!" After that, each time I ask my indignant question and pause, my students respond with a hearty and cheerful "No, we do not!" Likewise, I teach them that anytime a dichotomy is presented in the course materials, we will ultimately reject it in favor of a nuanced continuum of possibilities. Thus, when I ask "and do we accept dichotomies?" they know the answer is always "no," followed quickly by, "and what would be more useful than a dichotomy?" and the students respond, "a continuum." One of my colleagues teaches her students to respond "hegemony!" to dominant culture representations of marginalized groups before engaging in critique. Students will eventually respond as desired when prompted, and in my experience, they laugh while doing so. Much of the humor comes from my mock indignation, but they also chuckle simply from the playful manner of being asked to respond in unison with their classmates, something that does not typically happen in classroom except with very young children. As with all types of humor, instructors should remain alert for the occasional student who may find this technique alienating. In my experience, a handful of students may decline to join in the response, but given how brief the call-and-response interactions are, no one has appeared to be (or reported being) overwhelmed or distressed by it.

## Toys and Objects

Another way to be playful with students and entice them to laughter is to have them use children's toys or other silly objects that have been repurposed to demonstrate concepts. This is a form of kinesthetic (tactile or movement oriented)

learning, the benefits of which are well documented by education research (Mobley & Fisher, 2014). Kinesthetic learning can also be humorous (Smith & Noviello, 2012). As students manipulate the objects, they tend to laugh. Granted, some laugh more readily in the spirit of the exercise, while others laugh at the object more derisively, but students report enjoying these exercises. For example, to have students discuss gendered patterns of child socialization, I put them in groups and ask them to play with toys designed for preschoolers, some of which involve more feminine styles of nondirected play that is based in conversation (playing as a group with small "Muppet" action figures and their accompanying space ships), while others involve more masculine play (rules-based board game, with turn taking and winners/losers) (Wood, 2014). In research methods, I have students work in groups to arrange bags of blocks by color, shape, and other categories to explore the possibilities of finding/constructing more than one meaningful set of content themes in interview data. In each case, the students are amused by engaging in unexpected tasks that are, on the surface anyway, completely age inappropriate for the college classroom. Of course, I have designed each exercise so that the toys are instrumental in illustrating specific concepts or processes, but that does not take any of the fun out of it. Then they reflect on the play, still enjoying themselves, while making important connections between their play and the lesson we are learning together. One research team noted the potential in this form of play as a learning strategy: "Rather than simply engaging in an enjoyable, intrinsically motivated activity, serious play invokes conscious reflection on the activity itself in a way that directly connects the play space to real-life issues and concerns" (Hinthorne & Schneider, 2012, p. 2808).

## Humorous Exemplars

This is perhaps the most obvious approach to incorporating humor into one's classroom, but it bears mentioning that most topics, even very serious ones, can be introduced or illustrated using humorous cartoons, video clips, or other funny representations (Gray, 2014), which is a popular way to teach in many disciplines (Levey, 2015). As Hackathorn et al. (2012, p. 121) suggest, "in this way the instructor does not have to rely on his or her own comedic value, but can borrow from other sources instead." I often begin class discussions with a funny picture or cartoon from the Web or a brief, humorous video from YouTube, Upworthy.com, and other online sources. This is a good opening gambit to engage students; even if the video or other humor does not accomplish anything beyond poking fun at the topic, the humor sets up the accompanying explanation as more interesting than it otherwise would have appeared. Ideally, the humorous example goes beyond merely introducing a topic to illustrate one or more concepts or processes. There is some evidence that video examples used to illustrate concepts in lectures "improves recognizing details" (Suzuki & Heath, 2014). Humorous interactions can also be enacted in person rather than on video: nursing schools have found that prewritten, humorous skits acted out by instructors and used to illustrate specific

points, engage students in material and reinforce important points about nursing care delivery (Smith & Noviello, 2012). I also ask my students to work in groups to have them plan and act out for the class (very brief) interactions to illustrate concepts, a process that inevitably amuses both the students who are performing and those listening. Getting students to generate examples is a powerful learning tool (Watson & Mason, 2002), especially when they often are also humorous.

A variation on having students generate and act out humorous examples is to invite them to share their media-saturated worlds with the instructor and the class. First, I lecture on a topic, then we watch and discuss one or two examples from classic films or from television series that I enjoy that students are less likely to know well (such as those on public television or that were popular when they were very young). Then, I invite students to volunteer examples of the day's concepts from their own media consumption—both favorite programs and shows they really dislike. While they give me search terms to put into "YouTube" or other websites to look up, I urge them to explain the shows, many of which I have never heard of, and I make quips about my being out of touch with their generation. As we watch their examples and discuss connections, I make fun of my own lack of "coolness," or cultural cache, and invite them to educate me on their generation's perspectives. I often exaggerate the degree to which I do not know the famous athlete, actor, or musician to whom they refer so that they will explain more, and I frequently adopt a comedic expression of combined surprise, dismay, and alarm during blatantly sexist and/or stereotypical representations of race, such as in music videos, which inevitably sparks students' laughter. The process is playful which is good for learning (Bateson & Martin, 2013). I not only encourage students to make fun of me, I actively participate with self-deprecating humor, making my middle-aged tastes an object of laughter and promoting bonding through shared laughter. To be clear, I do not ever make fun of students during this exercise. Rather, I praise them for finding great examples that illustrate absurdities of contemporary culture or exaggerations of cultural tropes. Thus, the class and I laugh at me and at the video or comic, but not at the person who suggested the example. Also, care should be taken not to overdo self-deprecating humor to the detriment of students' respect for the instructor or their disengagement with the course material (Banas et al., 2011).

## She Who Laughs First

In closing, a well-known proverb suggests that he (and she) who laughs last laughs best. Yet I want to suggest that beginning a course with shared laughter and encouraging students to laugh early and often throughout the term is a better approach to embracing humor in university teaching. Being so willing to laugh—at myself, course concepts or theories, video clips, students' witty remarks, and so on —is a big reason that I enjoy what I do, so I make significant efforts to incorporate humor strategically into all of my class sessions. Moreover, mistakes inevitably

happen—failing technology, my own forgetfulness, tired and cranky students who are reluctant to participate—and I have always believed that it is better to offer a humorous remark and laugh with my students whenever possible, rather than to give into embarrassment or frustration in front of them. Hopefully, the strategies I have suggested in this chapter provide both inspiration and models of incorporating humor through the first day of class, call and response, toys or silly objects, and humorous videos, comics, and skits. It takes practice to be comfortable and confident using humor, and some humor experiments in the classroom will doubtlessly fail, which is not necessarily completely bad—instructors' pedagogical failures may offer yet more opportunities for self-deprecating humor and shared laughter. All instructors have the potential to blend their own and their students' senses of humor, along with humorous bits of popular culture, to create more engaging classrooms.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. Share some of your favorite humorous anecdotes, sayings, sketches, or visuals—how could they be deconstructed and made relevant to your teaching environment?
2. What types of jokes and humor do you or your colleagues currently use in your classrooms and why?
3. Thinking about the content of your teaching, what aspects or topics might lend themselves easily to a humorous approach and what would not be so easy?
4. What cultural contexts could be considered by students about the use of humor in your classroom and how could students assist with this development?

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# Chapter 9
# Moving Lessons: Teaching Sociology Through Embodied Learning in the HE Classroom

**Alex Channon, Christopher R. Matthews and Anastasiya Khomutova**

**Abstract** This chapter outlines an approach to classroom teaching that makes use of physical movement alongside more traditional lecturing methods when delivering lessons on abstract theoretical material. It develops the notion of embodied learning as a 'physical metaphor', outlining some examples of this practice that we have used in our recent work with a class of first year undergraduates. We argue that conceptualising students as embodied subjects, whose capacity to learn extends through and beyond their physical selves, educators are able to enhance classroom delivery by diversifying teaching activities and creating opportunities for enjoyable and memorable learning experiences. We advocate the reflexive, contextually sensitive and level-appropriate use of this method, arguing that despite some limitations it can animate students' understanding of academic ideas in uniquely personalised ways.

## Introduction: Self- and Student-Centeredness in HE Teaching

As early career academics starting our HE teaching careers at three different 'post-92' UK institutions[1] during the early-mid 2010s, our initial experiences as university

[1]Post-92 institutions are those granted the ability to award university degrees after 1992, many of which previously existed as technical colleges beforehand. Although there are certainly exceptions, they are generally ranked lower on most national league tables than comparable, older institutions; they typically offer courses that are vocational in nature; and they generally tend to place more importance on income generated through teaching than research.

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educators followed similar, somewhat paradoxical paths. Fresh from our respective PhD programmes, we entered our first lecturing posts on the back of several years of developing, and then proving, our ability to understand and communicate complex academic ideas largely through the medium of written prose and academic oratory. Herein, we built our self-concept as academics on how well we could perform 'at the sharp end' of intellectual discourse, both as an end in itself, but also as an indicator of our likely future successes in the vital games of grant-winning and research dissemination. Could we add those all-important lines to our CVs by publishing papers in reputable, peer-reviewed journals? Could we deliver bullet-proof academic presentations in just 15 minutes to a critical audience of our peers? Could we hold our own in debates on Judith Butler's feminism, or the importance of reading Norbert Elias in German? Ultimately, could we prove that *we were good enough* for academia?

Although central to the eventual, successful completion of our theses and viva exams, this side of our PhD experiences did little to prepare us to enter a world where the learning of undergraduate students would be of utmost importance in our daily working lives. Encouraged over the course of several years of undergraduate and postgraduate study to view our work as an individual performance upon which we would be evaluated, we operated in ways which placed ourselves at the centre of what we did. How well we understood the (often unfamiliar) topics we would be required to teach; how slick our multimedia Prezi or PowerPoint presentations could be; and how well we could 'stand and deliver' to a crowded lecture theatre became the defining concerns of those early months on the job. Although we worked in a HE sector saturated with rhetoric around being 'student-centred', our long-habituated focus on the self was not helped by the evaluative climate shaped by probationary periods, mentorship arrangements and individualised student assessment of the modules we taught. Thus, as we transitioned from research-focused to teaching-heavy roles, the matter of questioning 'how good we were' as academics remained central to our day-to-day work.

While this did not mean that we were poor teachers at this time, it nevertheless provided the starting point for an important early lesson in what it means to be genuinely 'student-centred', in practice rather than simply in theory. In this sense, it was not the fact that we were reflective on our performances that mattered, but rather the criteria against which we were initially given to evaluating them. Particularly, this revolved around a failure to foreground what it was that our audiences in the lecture hall actually wanted and needed, focusing instead on our own preconceived ideas about what might count as a successful lesson or module delivery. In this sense, it was not unsurprising to find students questioning the relevance of the theoretical material we taught, or simply struggling to focus on the abstract ideas we were presenting to them through a mode of teaching with which we ourselves were most familiar. As a consequence, the knowledge and academic skill set we were hoping to impart to our students were getting lost in translation; our undergraduates were simply not ready for a method of learning built largely upon the expectations and habituated practices of post-doctoral researchers.

Subsequently, following our early experiences with both formal and informal student feedback, we came to realise that our initial perspectives on what counted

as good academic work had left us somewhat out of step with the young people with – and for whom – we were now working. Questioning the purpose and direction of the HE experience from our students' point of view, we found ourselves able to reflect differently on our potential as educators. While we wanted the students to be exposed to rigorous, critical and comprehensive intellectual arguments, the students wanted to learn something enjoyable that could hold their interest and attention. While we cared about research-informed teaching, driven by new developments in our respective fields, the students wanted to learn things that held relevance for them, either personally or with respect to their career aspirations. And while we wanted to discuss those things in class that we cared deeply about, our students wanted us to show them why they should care about these things, too. Although at first it was tempting to view such differences as being oppositional in some way, asking how we might marry up such apparently competing goals led our professional reflection in some intriguing directions. Whatever the answers we might arrive at, as the professionals in whom our undergraduates had at least partially invested their futures, we owed them such a place of prominence in our reflective processes and evolving pedagogical practices.

Such recognition, of course, was timely in a context of increasing importance becoming attached to objective measures of 'student experience', like the UK's National Student Survey,[2] along with other outcomes such as graduate 'employability', measured nationally in the UK by the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey.[3] However, unlike these quantified, dehumanising exercises that 'centralise' students as statistical entities, our realisation that students' needs and desires ought to figure centrally in our work was built upon the growing empathy formed within and through pedagogical relationships with young people. Thus, rather than reducing our work to a series of arbitrary concerns over 'key performance indicators' (employability, satisfaction, etc.), these issues prioritised the actual experiences of students, as illustrated to us through formal feedback mechanisms but also established through tutorial sessions and other informal chats around campus. We thereby re-focused our understanding of 'student experience' on the purposeful enhancement of students' learning and, most importantly of all, the development of *their desire to learn*.

Such fundamental concerns form the basis upon which we develop the rest of this chapter. While a great many topics for debate might arise from these statements and observations, we focus here on the issue of promoting students' engagement and enthusiasm for study, and our role in nurturing this as a means of better equipping them to develop vital graduate skills. More specifically, we argue that departing from normative expectations about university-level study as a disembodied, rational, purely cognitive activity can provide some answers to the question of reconciling the apparently competing visions of HE noted above. Such a departure is particularly important when considering the increasingly large

[2]See http://www.thestudentsurvey.com.

[3]See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/dlhe.

number of students who arrive at university unprepared for the model of learning represented by what we might call the traditional, 'sit and listen, go and read' approach that we were, to varying degrees, exposed to ourselves – and which formed the primary means of our own learning (at doctorate level) immediately prior to entering the HE teaching profession.

In what follows then, we outline one particular method for accomplishing this goal – the use of embodied learning strategies within the HE classroom. We argue that this approach offers the potential to create enjoyable and memorable experiences that resonate well with our students' conceptions of engaging, effective, and ultimately 'satisfying' university education. As formal and informal feedback from our students have shown, such methods can be helpful in personalising learning and emphasising, to varying degrees, the relevance of conceptual material delivered in more abstract or discursive ways. As we hope to show, embodied approaches can accommodate critical intellectual sensibility and reflexive self-awareness, forming a pedagogically robust method of promoting student engagement and development within the context of the classroom itself, and thereby providing a genuine enhancement of the student experience of HE teaching.

## Moving Lessons: Learning Through Moving

Among physical educationists, the notion that physical activity can be a valuable medium for learning is a widely shared ideal. Indeed, that young people can effectively benefit in numerous and diverse ways (including the development of social skills, construction of moral frameworks or even improvements in literacy and numeracy, etc.) through lessons built upon embodied learning is a core assumption of physical education. However, such a possibility is often overlooked outside of the discipline, where pernicious intellectual snobbery, built on the shaky foundations of Cartesian Dualism, persists in educational settings across many social contexts, prioritising the 'mental' over the 'physical' and wrongly assuming that 'never the twain shall meet' (see Hardman & Green, 2011). This has traditionally seen physical education classes receive short shrift in terms of schools' curriculum time and budgetary expenditure, with the PE teaching profession often dismissed as a role with little value beyond sport training or health management for primary- and secondary-age pupils' learning (Green, 2008).

Central to this general scepticism is the notion that bodily movement-based learning activities are only useful for enhancing pupils'/students' embodied competencies, with little to offer the development of 'the mind'. Such reasoning carries over into the HE context; in this sense, the use of physical activity in such fields as actor training, dance and performing arts, or sport coaching/pedagogy is common, focusing on students' developing physical skills and embodied knowledge, but movement rarely features as a medium for learning outside of such 'practical' contexts. However, our experience tells us that there are a number of ways in which physical movement in lectures and seminars can contribute positively towards

students' critical, intellectual development; that is, 'moving lessons' can add value to more than just the most obviously embodied fields of learning.

This observation, of course, is not new in terms of existing theory and scholarship on embodied or 'kinaesthetic' learning as a tool for formal educational pedagogy. An element of Gardner's influential (2006) notion of multiple intelligences, implicit within Kolb's (1984) typology of learning, and constituting one dimension of the popular Visual Auditory Kinaesthetic model (Dunn & Dunn, 1992), among others, the kinaesthetic/bodily dimension of human learning is a well-established concept in educational scholarship. Likewise, a wide and expansive research base crossing fields including anthropology, psychology, sociology and neuroscience demonstrate the fundamentally embodied nature of human subjects and by extension, their capacity to learn (e.g. Cromby, 2015; Crossley, 2006; Shapiro, 2014; Spatz, 2015). This makes clear that cognitive, affective and social dimensions of human experience should not be conceptualised in ways that separate them from the physical body, the conduit through which subjects interface with the world as they construct their understanding of it.

Despite such knowledge abounding across academic fields, embodied learning and the physical activities this might involve within the university classroom is very rarely discussed in practical-oriented textbooks on teaching and learning in HE (e.g. Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Dunne & Owen, 2013; Lea, 2015; Light, Cox, & Calkins, 2009 – see Biggs & Tang, 2011 for a notable but very brief exception). This preserves the myth that education – and particularly 'higher' education – is fundamentally premised upon techniques for developing student's disembodied mental capacities. Indeed, while 'keeping students active' is often cited as a meaningful pedagogical method in many such texts, and is a mantra we've often heard from professional development workshop facilitators and our own colleagues across multiple university departments, this is almost always noted with reference to some form of cognitive engagement in, for instance, group discussion or problem solving, without attention to the potential of *physical* activity for meeting learning goals.

Meanwhile, in some texts (e.g. Mortiboys, 2010), physical activity is mentioned purely with respect to behaviour management, and then only in passing and without any clear articulation of specific classroom methods, or attention to their more robust pedagogical applications. In others, discussion of the embodied dimensions of teaching are primarily associated with understanding the lecturer's body (e.g. Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2015). Although discussing bodily techniques used when lecturing (such as voice projection and body language) or embodied differences between lecturers (such as sex/gender and ethnicity) is certainly worthwhile, foregrounding these important phenomena without also paying attention to the role of students as embodied agents in the learning process replicates the broader contextual problem outlined above regarding a lack of genuine student-centeredness in HE pedagogy.

In spite of this relative lack of attention in the extant 'how to' literature on HE teaching and learning, we argue that embodied methods can provide a uniquely rich opportunity to animate students' classroom experiences, bringing conceptual material 'to life' in potentially profound ways. Recognising students as embodied

subjects, 'moving lessons' prioritise physical interaction and experience, engaging students' kinaesthetic sense of themselves and others rather than depending solely on auditory and visual teaching methods. They can deploy students' own bodies as metaphorical or literal examples for illustrating conceptual ideas, thereby personalising learning in unique ways and adding a visceral sense of immanence to the abstract material being taught. And of course, they have the potential to be a lot of fun as well, helping keep students engaged, potentially making for more memorable classroom teaching and, in our view, constitute a more rewarding experience as lecturers (see Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Although there is plenty to unpack and critique within this position, it is not our intention in this chapter to contribute to or answer existing theorisations of embodiment and embodied learning in this field, but rather to share some examples of practical strategies that have been useful to us in our recent teaching of sociology. In particular, the stories we share below highlight the uses of embodied learning methods for animating conceptual lessons in the classroom, intended to provide some indication of how lessons involving physical movement can enrich student learning of abstract sociological concepts and intellectual skills.

## Physical Metaphors: Practical Examples of 'Moving Lessons'

In what follows, we outline three separate but similar classroom activities that we have recently used towards these ends. It should be stressed that the activities discussed below are not designed towards developing physical skills or competencies, but rather providing a means for students to embody some aspects of the otherwise theoretical lessons being delivered, thereby coming to grasp conceptual material traditionally taught through only discursive or audio-visual methods.

It is also worth noting that these sessions all took place with groups of students with whom we had spent a few weeks building up rapport beforehand, wherein we deliberately sought to construct our lectures as 'safe places' where students could and should explore challenging ideas in a respectful and supportive manner. The students were told from the outset that we would, at various points on the module, be 'moving them around' in class as a means of helping them learn, and that any student who felt uncomfortable or would not be able to take part should feel under no obligation to do so (points we return to briefly below). We begin with a simple, lecture-based exercise within a first year undergraduate session on the topic of 'social stratification'.

## Vignette 1: Embodying Stratification

One of the first ways in which we saw the power of movement in the lecture theatre was during a class that was designed to help students develop an understanding of the ways in which social processes can stratify people and groups into

hierarchical relationships. Such a notion lends itself neatly to an embodied pedagogy whereby the physical group of students becomes a teaching device itself, and in so doing each student is provided with a vivid, physical illustration of a vital abstract idea. Following a discussion of the role that the media can play in normalising inequality by stigmatising certain bodies (those that are too fat, too old, etc.), Christopher set up an embodied learning task: ‘Right then, let’s take this further and try to get a real grasp of how this process might work in practice. Everyone down to the front (of the lecture theatre)!’

As expected, this request was met with an initial lack of movement but with some encouragement from Christopher and Alex, the students made their way down the stairs towards the lectern, whiteboard and teaching paraphernalia that tended to be off-limits to them. Once in place, the students were instructed to line up in height order: ‘tallest on the left, shortest on the right’. As approximately 100 bodies chaotically mingle around the front of the classroom, busily stratifying themselves, there is buzz of amusement; good-natured arguments break out among those of roughly even height. The novelty of moving around the lecture theatre clearly enthuses the majority of the students. Height rankings eventually achieved, Christopher shouts over the hubbub: ‘OK, so that was easy enough. Now… let’s go by age. Oldest on the right, youngest on the left’. With resigned smiles on their faces the mature students move off to the right, while the rest of the group start the process of figuring out each other’s birth dates. Once lined up, the students curiously scan their peers, noting who is apparently older than whom.

The job now is to help the students take this ‘moving lesson’ and learn from it. Christopher returns to the earlier discussion of social stratification, highlighting the role played by the lecturers, standing in for ‘society’, in demanding that bodies ought to be ranked by these arbitrary characteristics: ‘We’ve defined for you that height matters, that age matters, and that you should rank each other that way; think about how our society does this to us in other ways, like by sex, or race, or disability’. We encourage reflection on how people are stratified by both visible characteristics (like height) but also invisible, often assumed ones (like age). At this, several students nod their comprehension. We return to the examples noted previously regarding the mass media, discussing how certain bodies are more visible and thus made to seem more valuable; and how such value-judgements are made for us, and thrust upon us, by others.

The next phase of the exercise begins; we instruct the students to form groups of five or six, and joke, ‘It’s time to stratify based on ability, so let’s hope you’re feeling competitive!’ The response is, again, a mixture of bemusement and mild excitement. Christopher pulls out a stopwatch and tells the students to prepare to take it in turns to individually do press-ups for 30 seconds each. Teams are instructed to keep score themselves and to encourage their teammates; the next few minutes are a frantic mix of physical (in)action, laughing, cheering and cheating. Eventually, the exercise concludes: ‘Five, four, three, two, one, STOP!’ The students are asked to report how many press-ups their team managed; a show of hands for successively greater ranges of totals reveals the two highest scoring teams.

We instruct the majority of students to make their way back to their seats, while the two winning groups wait anxiously at the front of the lecture theatre, now the centre of attention. Christopher pulls out some high-visibility vests and asks the students to put them on: 'Right then, here we have them, the best of the best… Or are they? Nobody can do that many; this group must have cheated!' – a chorus of jeers from the theatre – 'They must now wear their vests for the rest of the day so that everyone on campus knows that they can't be trusted! And this group? They did well – too well! They've spent so much time in the gym that they have not been keeping up with their reading for this module. They have to wear these vests all day so that all of campus knows they are going to fail!'

The students now sitting comfortably in their seats laugh at the situation their colleagues find themselves in. Christopher delivers this all in a manner that makes it clear that he is being facetious, stepping out of the performance in order to pull the activity together: 'Right, so social processes don't just stratify us into different groups but they can put us into different hierarchies. We just did that using physical ability as a differentiator. And that's what the media images we talked about earlier do; they differentiate but can also stigmatise. I stigmatised those two groups by changing what their performances meant, by making it seem bad to be capable of something…'. The lecture continues from this point, touching on the power of the media in framing actions of different social groups differently; the gendering of athletic success, the racialising of crime and so on.

At the eventual close of this lecture, as with others, the students are encouraged to make notes on the lesson and to consider in groups their experiences of growing up and being caught up in such processes of stratification, reflecting on how their own bodies are often implicated in these processes. What we have sought to do here is personalise the teaching experience, in a way which not only requires active engagement, but also activates affective responses through the social interactions required of students, along with the ironically humorous inversion of physical hierarchies worked at the end. In so doing, we help students interpret and learn in a manner that can be personally resonant, clearly attached to the arbitrary positioning of their bodies within society. These aims are also borne out in the next example, which called for further interaction while underscoring two different conceptual lessons.

## Vignette 2: Socially Constructed Salsa

By halfway through the term, implementing this move of ours towards frequent, purposeful, 'constructively aligned' embodied learning exercises had started proving tricky. At face value, choosing a 'guinea pig' module on the social scientific study of sport and fitness should provide ample opportunities for embodied learning, but some weekly topics were proving tough to pin down suitable tasks for. One week had us thinking of exercises we might use to illustrate how bodies – their fitness, their shapes, their skill sets and the meanings we attach to these

**Fig. 9.1** – Salsa dancing is unfamiliar to many young British students. Here, Anastasiya (left) and Alex use the activity to encourage reflection on how bodies, and their competencies, are socially constructed. Photo courtesy of Alex Channon

things – are 'socially constructed'. We knew that, for our class of first year undergraduates, novel ways of illustrating this concept would be helpful, and no more so than one which put their own bodies' construction in the limelight. Examples from sport and fitness practices abound, but what could we do in the space of 45 minutes that was safe, inclusive, and met the learning objectives set during the lecture?

The answer came in the form of a salsa class (Fig. 9.1). Anastasiya had a history as a dancer, and followed Alex's lecture on social constructionist theory with a beginners' session sprung on unsuspecting students in the university gymnasium. The group's immediate response was divided; some quickly retreated to the rear of the hall, groaning in anticipation of their perceived, impending embarrassment, while others started cheering and shimmying, eager for the chance to show off their steps. This was a calculated move on our part; dance often has such an effect on young adults, and for students with no dance experience who'd taken a sport-based module, whose superior physical fitness and skill was likely otherwise a source of confidence and pride, this up-close encounter with their own ineptitude and discomfort would later demonstrate one of our intended learning outcomes well.

The lesson began, Cuban music blaring, and students – some eagerly, others nervously – began copying the steps that Anastasiya, helped by some of the more able dancers in the group, set for them. After the basics were introduced, we picked individuals to step forward and show their moves – further light-hearted embarrassment, balanced with some enthusiastic peacocking. Then came the second phase of the lesson: 'partner up!', Alex yelled over the music; 'partner up with someone who's about the same size!' Predictably interpreted as someone of the same sex, students drifted into couples and waited. Anastasiya and Alex moved to the centre of the hall. 'Ok', she began, 'into the closed position – like this!'

As the two lecturers joined hands, placing a free hand to each other's backs, the jovial tension we had been hoping for grew. We knew we might be treading a fine line here, deliberately playing with notions of gender propriety, but our conceptual point was being set up perfectly. As students moved in time with their partners, we noticed that only a few of the boys were holding each other, most electing instead to stand off and mimic the position as they stepped in time to the music – a point to return to later, we knew. The last part of the exercise saw the students arranged in two circles, one inside the other, so that partners could quickly be swapped and moves practiced anew with unfamiliar others as one circle rotated around the other. As the session neared its end, we thanked and congratulated the group for their efforts and sat them down for a reflective discussion.

'So', Anastasiya asked, 'who enjoyed that?' Plenty of hands went up. 'And who didn't?' Some laughs, a few further hands. 'Ok, but let's think about why not. We'll assume it wasn't my teaching' – a few further laughs – 'so what's the problem with doing salsa?' The ensuing discussion pointed to a fear of public humiliation, a lack of practice, the awkwardness of the steps and of touching each other. 'Plenty to unpack here, right?' asked Alex. 'Let's start with the lack of practice – why haven't you practiced?' One young man – conveniently, a foreign student from a Latin American country – chipped in: 'well you guys don't do this much here. For me, I grew up with this. No problems for me!' Indeed, we elaborated. Our bodies' skills, and the confidence we take from them, are greatly shaped by culture. A female student eagerly interjected; 'I know a lot of us girls have a dance background, so it's ok for us' – 'Yeah', added another, 'and it's not the same problem for girls to get over the touching thing, is it…'.

Upon encouraging the students' reflective discourse on what had enabled or constrained their enjoyment of the class, the social construction of bodily action was clearly foregrounded, as students worked towards an appreciation of how their own abilities and dispositions had been shaped by cultural forces made visible through the salsa lesson. Gendered discourses stigmatising male dancers, and particularly male–male touch in quasi-sexualised encounters like paired dancing, were to thank for both the unfamiliarity many of the young men had towards the movements we taught, and also their initial awkwardness at being in hold. For the novice dancers, a gradual progression of their embodied ability – albeit minimal in the context of the lesson – was itself shown to be the effect of social relations between us the lecturers, and them the students. We had defined this physical enskilment as valuable and they, deferring to our authority in the context of the classroom, had therefore learned. And for those more expert dancers, the chance to demonstrate their bodies' capacities in an unfamiliar setting was shown to have served up opportunities to convert physical capital into a form of cultural capital, winning admiration of lecturers and peers alike. In this sense, an intellectual lesson was neatly depicted through an embodied activity built around a *physical metaphor*. The final vignette exemplifies this technique more directly, although used to develop students' understanding of academic writing rather than social theory.

## Vignette 3: 'Writing Is like Fighting'

As scholars with intellectual backgrounds in psychology and sociology who have been teaching on multi-disciplinary degree programmes within schools with diverse academic traditions, we have often noted that it falls to us and our colleagues to deliver not only social science-related content to students, but also to bear much of the responsibility for developing students' writing skills. Often done in either an informal, ad-hoc (in one-to-one, non-compulsory tutorial meetings) or a formal, post-hoc (by way of essay feedback) manner, there is often little purposeful time dedicated to teaching students how to write before they submit their first essays. For this reason, we decided to include a formal session specific to essay writing techniques to the module, and true to form, to deliver this through another 'moving lesson'.

Specifically, we decided to use a blend of embodied, multimedia, and interactive seminar learning in order to not only inject a deal of unpredictability and fun into this otherwise rather dry, technical subject, but also to provide multiple channels for developing and reinforcing our intended learning outcomes. Departing from the usually timetabled location, we split our large class into several smaller groups, booked a morning-long slot in the university gymnasium, and told our students to arrive for particular time-slots wearing light tracksuits and bringing a notepad and pen. We set up the room with a television screen, surrounded by wooden gym benches, in one corner, while the rest of the hall's floor was surfaced with martial arts training mats. Students arrived to find each of us wearing boxing gloves and training outfits, and while laughing off their amusement, set their bags and shoes to one side and gathered barefoot in the centre of the hall.

'Writing', declared Alex, 'is like fighting. We're gonna teach you how to write an academic essay today, but we'll do it with a metaphor that'll hopefully be a bit more fun, a bit more memorable than your typical lesson'. Between us, we go on to explain the central themes of the session, outlining our key learning outcome – that an academic essay is, first and foremost, an exercise in making an argument. We tell students to note down several key points that go into making such arguments – the research, planning and other background work; the importance of logically transitioning between disparate points in one's writing; the need to adopt persuasive language to help a reader accept one's case; the conclusive delivery of one's thesis; and so on. Then, we ask the group to stand: 'put your notepads down, find a space, get warmed up!'

A few star jumps, some press-ups and a little light stretching later, we begin a boxing exercise after spelling out the first principle we wish the students to grasp. When fighting, we need to move our opponent's guard, luring them into a counter attack while we prepare them for our own scoring blows. Christopher demonstrates a simple technique with Alex as his target (Fig. 9.2) – two, three, four blows low on the body; as Alex repeatedly drops his guard to intercept, suddenly the fifth punch goes high, catching him on the temple. After a number of

**Fig. 9.2** – Christopher's low jabs make Alex drop his guard, setting him up for the high right hook. With confident delivery and a little experience, this demonstration can be done at high speed for a more memorable, impactful lesson on forming a 'well-structured' argument. Photo courtesy of Anastasiya Khomutova

**Fig. 9.3** – Christopher and Alex supervise foot-sparring, as students learn that success depends on pre-empting opponents' counter attacks. This physical metaphor helps students grasp the importance of thinking through potential critiques of their written work, before preparing arguments accordingly. Photo courtesy of Anastasiya Khomutova

demonstrations, Christopher checks that the principle is clear. After clarifying the group's understanding, we move the exercise forward.

To add a 'live' feel to the drill, but keep things safe for our novice students, we set them off on a game of 'foot-sparring' in size-matched pairs. Judging distance and foot speed, the students must attempt to step lightly on their opponents' feet while protecting their own (Fig. 9.3). Before long, an elaborate dance of feint and counter can be observed across the hall, as the sparring pairs grasp the tactics of

responding to, pre-empting, and manipulating their opposite number's moves with careful timing and measured attacks. The game is good natured, with much laughter, but also a moderate level of competitive intensity, just enough to ensure the group's engagement.

Moments later, in full-group discussion once again, we reach our first conceptual point. The techniques we use as skilled fighters presuppose the existence of an opponent's defence, and to be effective they must find a way to overcome it. These techniques are rehearsed continually, to breed familiarity, and then put into effect against a live opponent. We ask the group, 'what does this all tell us about writing?' Some answers are offered, and we work through students' ideas and encourage dialogue as the lesson begins to coalesce. When we write, we should first practice discussing our subject matter, preparing for the obvious critiques of our arguments, so that we might pre-empt them in our work. Ultimately, we must aim to deliver a case in a way that is most persuasive to a potentially sceptical reader in the final offering.

At this point, we sit the group down in their pairs. 'By now', Christopher begins, 'you know what you might write your essays for this module on. So one of you tell your partner, in one sentence, what your central argument is – then partners, come back with the first, most obvious criticism you can' – he drops his arms to guard his body – 'and then I want you to work together to reframe the argument to counter that critique' – he throws a high, left hook. 'Got it? Ok, off you go!' Chatter ensues, notes are taken – often at our encouragement – as students think through framing their theses in ways which pre-emptively address or neutralise potential counterpoints. A few minutes later we call the group to attention again, moving to the next phase of the lesson.

We now expand the physical metaphor to cover another element of academic writing that we often find students struggle with – transitioning between paragraphs. Alex tells the group – 'so, me and Anastasiya are in a fight, ok? She's a boxer and I don't want to fight her standing up; I'm a decent wrestler and I want to try to strangle her! That's my best chance of winning. But I can't strangle her from here' – Alex puts his face to Anastasiya's outstretched fist – 'so I need a way of getting from point A to point B, right? I need a *transition*'. Together, the two execute a parry of a punch and two simple, controlled throwing moves. We have the group spread out and carefully rehearse this sequence, supervising the rudimentary take-down and arm-drag techniques. The students' enthusiasm is impossible to miss; laughter mixes with the exchange of feedback and congratulation as pairs of students learn to respond to each other's cues, timing their moves and rehearsing in collaboration, as we drift among them to correct and advise on their performance (Fig. 9.4).

'This is how you build your argument', Anastasiya says, as the group gathers around the television, a looped montage of mixed martial artists performing takedowns playing via YouTube. 'You've made your first point, there's nothing more to gain by going on and on with it. You gotta get to the second point to close out the argument, to win the fight'. The students collectively wince as a hard, slamming throw plays out on the screen. Alex continues the lesson: 'Right! But you

**Fig. 9.4** – Alex blocks Anastasiya's attack, setting up an arm-drag technique to move behind her and initiate a stranglehold. This mimics the importance of transitioning neatly and logically between disparate parts of a theoretical argument, moving one's reader along the journey towards a 'fight-ending', or argument-winning, conclusion. Photo courtesy of Gary Stidder

can't just suddenly start the next point. That fight didn't just suddenly drop to the ground – so when you change focus you need to *get your reader there* somehow'. We then cut off the video, and each read out transitionary sentences from some of our own writing, explaining that even small segments of sentences can ease the flow of an academic argument. Then, handing out pre-prepared extracts of suitable journal articles that are relevant to the students' studies, we ask them to identify examples of good transitions themselves. After some time, they can easily identify and explain them back to us.

Such a lesson as this explores a metaphorical relationship that helps students understand the essentially *interactional* nature of writing. We highlight in these and other ways how writing can be imagined as part of a social encounter, conceivable in the context of a struggle between antagonists, namely the writer and their sceptical reader, whose resistance must be overcome through sound argument, backed by carefully gathered evidence, skilfully delivered through logically structured, flowing prose. Students learn that they cannot simply write to evidence their own knowledge (i.e. shadow-box), but must do so directly and expressly in order to convince a reader of their point of view (i.e. actually hit a resisting opponent). The richness of the 'fighting' metaphor extends in various directions, and these hour-long sessions go by quickly, blending enjoyable (and for many students, wholly novel) physical activity with interactive learning and memorable video sequences. While this particular method for teaching writing resonates with us as a teaching team (we each train in combat sports and avidly follow boxing and mixed martial arts), it is also engaging for our students given its novelty value. Of course, this is but one of a range of possible ways to conceptualise writing as a social encounter that can be taught through the up-close and personal medium of embodied learning.

## Reflections and Conclusion

While the use of movement in the classroom has enthused us and our students, and to date proven useful in diversifying and 'jazzing-up' (as one observing colleague put it) our classroom pedagogy, this method is not without its limitations. Principally, there is a duty of care here which lecturers must consider, concerning the need to ensure equity and prevent the isolation of those who cannot (or do not want to) engage in moving lessons. Simply put, our students do not move equally, and they do not all share the same physical abilities, which has clear implications for inclusivity when lessons are built around physical activity. However, because the model we are advocating here does not depend upon performing specific physical skills, and only really requires that students are in some way 'moving' while learning, this does not mean that physical disabilities (for instance) are an immovable barrier to their implementation. Rather, with an awareness of students' abilities beforehand, lecturers are able to shape classroom activities in ways which are as inclusive as possible while contributing to the intended learning outcomes of the session.[4]

Furthermore, it is entirely possible that differences in students' physical abilities can contribute to the potential for moving lessons to be useful pedagogical exercises. However, when making ability/disability salient to classroom learning, as with any such form of difference between students' own bodies, it is essential to retain a focus on preserving wellbeing while devising activities for use. Because students' ability ranges, along with any anxieties and vulnerabilities concerning their bodies and/or their abilities may not always be visible to lecturers (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016), it is vital to notify students in advance if a lesson is going to involve some kind of practical physical activity, and to make clear that they are not compulsory elements of that lesson. As noted previously, the examples listed here were delivered only after an initial period of teaching had passed, through which we were able to build rapport with the group in question and establish clear parameters regarding the moving lessons themselves, and the etiquette for engaging in them.

Another, more practical issue concerns fears over the health and safety implications of physical activity. The completion of risk assessments in line with local, institutional policies for specific, unusual teaching activities can be a source of frustration for colleagues wishing to use this sort of teaching method on a regular basis, while the actual risk posed by some activities, particularly if poorly supervised or practiced in unsuitable facilities, may itself prove a deterrent. While there are certainly important concerns, and may see some imagined exercises being necessarily discarded, we nevertheless argue that the potential payoff of moving lessons is worth taking a little time to assess and manage the risks associated with them.

This said, we nevertheless appreciate that for some groups of students and some topical foci, physical activities may prove difficult to execute in ways which

[4]The literature on 'adapted physical activity', again derived from the physical education field, is worth consulting here. See for instance Sherrill (2004).

effectively prove inclusive, non-threatening, safe, and pedagogically worthwhile. Indeed, the simple matter of being confident that conceptual material will be made clearer by a moving lesson is perhaps one of the most obvious problems facing the implementation of such exercises, as too is the question of whether students will indeed benefit from them in the ways we've suggested they can. Certainly we have met with some instances of physical activities 'falling flat', most often due to poor planning on our part which left students under-engaged in exercises that seemed particularly useful in theory. As such, there is inevitably an element of risk-taking, and some trial-and-error, involved with making moving lessons a useful and meaningful addition to lecturers' pedagogical repertoires. Any colleagues interested in adopting this technique for the first time would do well to be mindful of the likely realities of initial failures.

Despite these drawbacks though, when engaging our students in the manner outlined above we have gained reportedly fantastic results in terms of learning, engagement and satisfaction. For instance, formal student feedback on the modules within which we have used these methods has been consistently improved from previous years, most notably with respect to items concerning the enjoyment of learning and quality of teaching. Perhaps more importantly though, we have used these exercises to help break down preconceptions about sociological theory and what studying sociology actually entails, inviting our students to experience a different way of exploring important academic ideas and ultimately, help shape their sociological imaginations in novel and memorable ways.

As such, it is our contention that learning by moving imbues the taught curriculum with a kind of vitality and personal significance that more abstract methods are not as able to achieve. The recognition that students live their lives as embodied subjects, with a capacity to learn that extends beyond audio-visual communication and into the realm of bodily movement, can provide lecturers with a valuable resource for personalising learning and fostering student engagement. We hope that the brief discussion and selected examples included in this chapter are of use to any colleagues who wish to develop their use of similar classroom methods.

## Suggested Discussion Questions

1. How could physical exercises, games, dances or other forms of movement become 'physical metaphors' useful for teaching theoretical or practical topics within your subject area?
2. Which forms of movement might best resonate with the interests of the students you are currently teaching, or enthuse them the most?
3. How might you adapt familiar movement forms (for instance, by blindfolding some students, changing games' rules, etc.) to make them more pedagogically effective in the context of the lesson you use them for?
4. What limitations will you need to consider in order to ensure that 'moving lessons' are as inclusive as possible for all the students you teach?

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# Chapter 10
# The Sociological Imagination and Feminist Auto/Biographical Approaches

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**Abstract** The development of my own 'sociological imagination' began when I signed on to study A Level sociology at my local FE college. The class was on a Monday and there were two TV programmes on later in the evening; one following a couple through their first year of marriage and another focusing on individuals who had survived in difficult circumstances. I'd rush home to catch them, watching them with new, enlightened eyes. In this first year of sociological study, I also became much more interested in the experience and consequences of personal politics and my exploration of and relationship to feminism also began at this time. Throughout my career I have engaged with sociological auto/biography in my research on reproductive and non/parental identities, working and learning in higher education; travel and transport mobilities and bereavement and loss. Additionally, feminist concerns have always influenced my methodological choices and my research and writing. In my teaching – which is always informed by my research endeavours – I have attempted to engage students in the exciting, messy world of research through a consideration of the feminist auto/biographical contention that feminist social research is in fact feminist theory in action. Thus, my argument is that research, and the teaching related to this, like life, is itself political and that it is important to reflect on this significance of this in all the work that we do.

## Introduction

The beginnings of the development of my own 'sociological imagination' began when I signed on to study A Level sociology at my local FE College. The class was on a Monday and there were two TV programmes on later in the evening; one following a couple through their first year of marriage and another focusing

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on individuals who had survived in difficult circumstances. I'd rush home to catch them, watching them with new, enlightened eyes. Although the content was very different each programme highlighted how the time (history) and place (society) in which we live affects our experience; our life choices and chances (biography). In this first year of sociological study I also became much more interested in the experience and consequences of personal politics and my exploration of and relationship to a gendered understanding of the world and to feminism also began at this time. Throughout my career, I have engaged with sociological auto/biography in my research on reproductive and non/parental identities, working and learning in higher education; travel and transport mobilities and bereavement and loss. Additionally, feminist concerns have always influenced my methodological choices and my research and writing. In my teaching – which is always informed by my research endeavours – I have attempted to engage students in the exciting, messy world of research through a consideration of the feminist contention that feminist social research is in fact feminist theory in action. Thus, my argument is that research, like life, is itself political and that it is important to reflect on the significance of this in all the work that we do.

In the remainder of this chapter, I outline some of my experiences as a learner, a researcher, a writer and a teacher through a consideration of *Early Influences and Further Developments; The Feminist Auto/Biographical Sociological Imagination* in and out of *the Classroom; Additional Creative Auto/Biographical Endeavours and Practices*. Throughout my presentation is auto/biographical and I end as I've begun with *Some Final (Personal) Reflections*.

## Early Influences and Further Developments

My own first engagement with the work of Charles Wright Mills began in my first year undergraduate studies. I was impressed by his call for a 'sociological imagination' – which *essentially* includes a sense of biography, attention to history and an awareness of the social structure. As Mills (1959) entreats this enables the sociologist to look at the familiar in social life and see it afresh.

At this time I was also interested in his pronouncements on the significance of the personhood of the social science as scholar:

> The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society, the question is where he (sic) stands within it …
>
> … learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. (Mills, 1959, p. 204)

Mills' approach acknowledges and celebrates the fact that individuals (including social scientists) are shaped by and themselves shape society. As Berger and Berger (1976, p. 21) put it:

> Our biography is very largely the story of our experience with society … we stop to reflect upon our biography to date, most of our recollections refer to other people – as

> individuals, in groups, and as encountered in institutions. We have social biographies. Indeed the time span of our biography is only a segment of the larger time span of the society in which it occurs – in other words, biography is located within history. Conversely, our knowledge of society is biographically acquired; we grow into a steadily expanding circle of social and institutional relationships ….

This then, is where my interest in auto/biographical sociology began, which is not, as Morgan (1998, p. 655) notes '… simply a shorthand representation of autobiography and/or biography but also [a] recognition of the inter-dependence of the two enterprises …'. So that 'In writing another's life we also write or rewrite our own lives; in writing about ourselves we also construct ourselves as somebody different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time' (Morgan, 1998).

In acknowledging this, we accept that all research and writing is in some ways auto/biographical, involving intersections of the lives of those who write and those who are written about (Stanley, 1992), and this in turn makes our work academically rigorous in that self-conscious auto/biographical writing identifies the social location of the writer thus making clear the author's role in constructing rather than discovering the knowledge produced (Letherby, 2000). Furthermore, auto/biographical sociological study – either focusing on one, several or many lives – highlights the need to liberate the individual from individualism; to demonstrate how individuals are social selves – which is important because a focus on the individual can contribute to the understanding of the general (Erben, 1998; Evans, 1997; Mills, 1959; Okley, 1992; Stanley, 1992).

It has become increasingly common for researchers to acknowledge the significance of their personhood; locating themselves within the research process to produce 'first person' accounts. There is also recognition among social scientists of the need to consider how the researcher as author is positioned in relation to the research process, not least with reference to the choice and design of the research fieldwork and analysis, editorship and presentation (Hallowell, Lawton, & Gregory, 2005; Iles, 1992; Letherby, 2003; Sparkes, 1998). Feminist researchers often go further in terms of an explicit recognition of the researcher's self, arguing that reflection on how the researcher as author is positioned in relation to the research process is an essential part of acknowledging the significance of the 'personal' as part of our political exploration of the social world. Feminists are concerned with the status and value of knowledge: who has the right to know, the relationship between the methods chosen, how they are used and the 'knowledge' produced and the status and value of feminist knowledge as a critique of mainstream explanations and pronouncements (Letherby, 2003, 2004; Letherby et al., 2013).

My interest in the auto/biographical and in feminist research approaches has led to a career-long interest in the knowing/doing relationship in research (i.e. the relationship between the process of research and the end product and between said product and any subsequent action/change in policy and practice). I have argued for a position I call 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby, 2003, 2013a; Letherby & Bywaters, 2007) – which requires the constant, critical interrogation of our

personhood – both intellectual and personal – with reference to the production, and (any) application, of the knowledge. All social research and writing involves individuals – researchers, respondents, gatekeepers, transcribers, analysers, authors – who have subjectivities, who make subjectivities. Theorised subjectivity accepts that research and scholarly writing is a power-laden, emotional, embodied experience but does not see this as a problem, just as how it is. Starting with the subjective is not to suggest that we should give into, indulge in subjectivity. Rather it requires the constant, critical interrogation of our personhood – both intellectual and personal – within the knowledge production process:

Throughout my research and writing I have always been concerned (and have concerns) with 'the pursuit for objectivity' and I have argued that if we start by accepting our subjective position – the significance of our personhood (intellectual and personal) within the research and writing process – and really try to understand the complexities and the influence of these, these 'biased sources' can themselves result in useful 'data' (Letherby, 2003, p. 71). I suggest that ironically, this acknowledgement of subjectivity and the associated 'super-sensitivity' to the 'relevance of the personhood of the researcher could feasibly lead to the conclusion that our work is more objective, in that our work, if not value-free, is value-explicit' (Letherby, 2003, p. 71)

Mills (1959) argued that the sociological imagination could 'facilitate ordinary people to make sense of the social condition by showing how their personal troubles both impacted on and were impacted by public issues …' (Brewer, 2005, p. 674). Following this Gouldner (1970) called for a responsible, reflexive, radical, critical sociology and more recently for others have advocated a 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005) or a 'reflexive sociology' that implies '[a] clear intent to work with reflexivity to produce an improved science exists … to deploy science to improve social conditions' (May & Perry, 2011, p. 49). Alongside this feminists (both within sociology and other disciplines) believe that feminist research is feminist theory in action. Thus:

> Feminist methodology is at the heart of the feminist project of changing the world because it is the focal point for bringing together theory, practical research methods, and the production of new knowledge. (Wise & Stanley, 2008, p. 221).

This reflexivity is as significant to teaching as it is to research not least because teaching should be informed by research, the development of critical understanding is central to learning and current learners become future researchers.

In recent years a growing number of researchers, many of whom of course are also teachers, across the social sciences, humanities, arts and physical sciences have begun to argue for ways to conduct politically aware research (described variously for example as community-based research, participatory research, collaborative research and action research) arguing for the democratization of the knowledge process, and for social change (see Letherby & Bywaters, 2007 for more detail). Funders, local and national governments, and research assessors too have begun to call for 'evidence based research' and for evidence of the useful 'impact' of research

(Letherby, 2013b) with 'relevance' and 'usefulness' defining what research should be done, what knowledge should be produced and how said knowledge will be assessed. Although on first instance this seems encouraging for those (as identified here) concerned that research should make a positive difference (not only to individuals and communities but also in terms of learning and understanding) but funding bodies, practitioners, policy makers and so on may have 'different priorities, use different languages, operate to different time scales' and 'are subjected to very different reward systems' (Nutley, 2003, p. 12) than researchers and respondents. What follows is a vignette which shows my own gradual understanding of the importance of, and challenges concerning, 'making research count':

At the beginnings of my academic career when starting my doctoral research on the experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' I was excited about the difference I thought I could make. My doctoral research was indeed invaluable to me. It taught me a lot about the whole process of research, it fuelled my fascination in methodological and epistemological debate, it enabled me to say some useful (I hope) things about childlessness, parenthood and identity, it gave me the resources to work in an environment I continue to find rewarding and challenging. What my PhD did not do was have the impact I hoped it would. I spoke about my work at conferences, wrote some articles and chapters and a few small pieces for non-academic audiences and I am gratified that I am still sometimes asked to speak, write, examine on the topic. I could have done more but as a doctoral student I did not have the skills or the support to do so. I was also, I think now, naïve in thinking that impact was inevitable.

More recently with colleagues from Coventry University I have been involved in a series of projects concerned to explore the experience of teenage pregnancy and young parenthood. All of this work was commissioned by practitioners, themselves responsible for the care and support of young women, their partners and their children. In addition to positive responses to our calls for the need for further research in specific areas (e.g. violence and abuse in the lives of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, antenatal care, father's experience) as a research team we have been, and continue to be involved in activities that could be described … as *impact* … We have, for example, developed and delivered (with young mothers) training packs for health and social care professionals; trained young mothers to become peer researchers and developed a questionnaire for young women entering and leaving semi-supported housing. In addition we have presented and published some of our findings within and beyond the academy (e.g. at local and regional meetings of those responsible for the deliverance of the UK *Teenage Pregnancy Strategy*, in the local and national press and in practitioner-focused publications) (see Brady, Bywaters, Kynspel, Letherby, & Steventon, 2007; Letherby, Brady, & Brown, 2007 for more detail on all of this) … Particularly significant here is the continued support we received from the commissioners of our various studies in the promotion of our findings and the support (including financial) for both further research and impact type activities (adapted from Letherby, 2013b, pp. 195–196).

## The Auto/Biographical Feminist Sociological Imagination in and out of the Classroom

The first non-textbook I read as an A Level Sociology student was *Coal Is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community* by Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter (1969). I was impressed by the careful focus on the working and personal lives of the authors' respondents and was especially interested in the discussion of gendered relations and expectations. Right from the start, sociology made me feel differently about the social world in which I lived and about my place within it as I began to reflect on my own life chances and experience with reference to what I was reading, what I was learning. This, then, was the beginning of the development of my personal 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959): a theoretically inquisitive approach relevant for all social scientists. It was a personal life changing experience, a miscarriage, experienced at 16 weeks after 15/16 months of 'trying for a baby' that led me to that FE College, to sociology. I went along to see what was on offer, unable as I was to work at my previous job of nursery nursing while I was grieving. From the beginnings of my undergraduate career two years later, I knew that I wanted my final year dissertation to be on women's experiences of miscarriage. So my engagement with the discipline was from the beginning auto/biographical. As this piece demonstrates, it remains so today.

As a teacher, I encourage students to read beyond the list of recommended sources that I provide. As a student, I learnt the importance of this for myself. Whilst browsing in the library in my second year of undergraduate study, I came across *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* by Stanley and Wise (1983[1993]) and my interest in and engagement with feminist methodology began. Writing about my PhD which focused on individuals', especially women's, experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' (written in single quotation marks to highlight the problem of definition) I argued:

I am conscious that I 'took away their words' and then analysed the data from my own political, personal and intellectual perspective. As Fine (1994) argues, research involves 'carving out pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit and deploy to border our arguments' (p. 22). Thus, I am aware that my voice is the loudest. With this in mind, I attempted to be sensitive to issues of power and control throughout the whole research process. When writing up my data, I highlighted my role in the selection and interpretation of respondents' narratives and in terms of presentation of 'findings' (Letherby, 2002, p. 3.7).

I wanted then, as I want now to represent respondents in the best, most useful, way I could, and believe that a critical consideration of the self and the other (and other others), the auto/biographical (alongside a focus on the significance of history and the social structure) within research is an important, indeed a crucial, aspect of this endeavour.

In the 20 years since I completed my PhD, I have researched and written about several things I have an auto/biographical connection to. This includes additional work on perinatal loss; travel and transport mobility; working and learning in

higher education; living with a chronic condition/caring for another with chronic and terminal conditions, bereavement and grief. Additionally I have worked on areas less connected to my own experience. For example, teenage pregnancy and young parenthood; motherhood in prison; infant feeding; institutional racism; negotiating full–time care for another; weight loss surgery.

One of the first ways to acknowledge that our work (as learners, teachers, researchers and writers) is affected by our own personhood is to write in the first person. '[T]he use of 'I'', (Stanley, 1993, pp. 49–50) – in essays, poster presentations, research reports and so on that focus on theoretical concerns and/or findings from research, as well as in research outputs – explicitly recognises that knowledge is contextual, situational and specific, and that it will differ systematically according to the social location (as a gendered, race, classed, sexualised person) of the particular knowledge-producer. It disappoints me then that my experience has often mirrored that of Sarah DesRoches (2011, p. 10):

> I taught a workshop on writing introductions for essays. I posted an ineffective introduction on a screen and asked students to point out the issues. I expected that they would notice that the scope was too large, the lack of supporting arguments or the poor grammar. Instead, the first student's comment was that, 'The author uses 'I''. Many heads nodded in agreement. 'Why is this a problem?' I asked. The same student answered, 'Because essays are supposed to be objective and if you use an 'I' that means that you're not being objective'.

A ridiculous example of this was when a group of Occupational Therapy students told me that they were instructed to write reflexive diaries focusing on their placements in practice in the third person. But the sociology students I have taught also often, too often, express the same concerns as DesRoches' (2011) students. This not only denies the inevitable political aspects of knowledge construction and simplistically goes along with outdated debates about objectivity but often leads to clunky alternatives such as 'the author notes' or 'this essay argues'. The main problem though is that writing in the third person discourages the writer from taking responsibility for the position presented which is particularly ironic with reference to a discipline such as sociology whose focus is on the self (and another) within society. As Mills (1959) reminds us we are all members of society ourselves and to deny this in our writing, the presentation of our reflexive, critical thinking, is to deny the sociological project.

In terms of auto/biographical inclusion and connection within research some scholars (as noted above) draw on their own autobiography throughout the research and presentation process, including them*selves* when analysing the data and writing up, which may involve inclusion of their own experience as 'data'. This is something that I encourage students to do (if they wish to) in essays, reflection and projects.

Reflecting on the status of knowledge and issues of involvement Barbara Katz Rothman (1996, p. 51) suggests that there has been a fundamental shift in methodological thinking where an 'ethic of involvement has replaced an ethic of objectivity'. From this perspective, writing from personal experience rather than from a position of 'detached objectivity' is likely to give the writer 'credentials'. I do not

agree with this for it is not always possible or desirable to research issues close to us (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Furthermore, identification should not be seen as a prerequisite to 'good' research, or good teaching and learning, nd/or scholars and researchers do not always identify with the work they read of the respondents they study (Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995). In sum leaners, researchers, writers, do not have to draw on their own life experiences to do 'good' work but our life experiences/identity are present at some level in all that we do and it is important to acknowledge this (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Letherby, 2003; Rothman, 2007). One way to encourage this is to foreground a critical consideration of identification, connection, detachment, difference in the sociological curriculum.

Across my career I have contributed to and/or led modules that engage with many such concerns, with the legacies of Mills' (1959) pronouncements in mind. Two examples follow.

## Case Study One: Travel and Transport Mobilities

In a first year module entitled *The Sociological Imagination* I contributed (for several years) a guest lecture within which I spoke about my research on travel and transport mobility. I conducted much of this work with my friend and colleague Gillian Reynolds. Gillian and I met as undergraduates and became close friends whilst sharing an office as postgraduates in the early 1990s. Our shared interest in auto/biography was represented in one of our earliest publications: a multi-authored book chapter focusing on experiences of being postgraduates (Holliday, Letherby, Mann, Ramsay, & Reynolds, 1993). Following completion of our PhDs at Staffordshire University we both got jobs that involved some travel; Gillian in Birmingham and me in Coventry, and would sometimes meet on the train on the way to or home from work. Our first travel and transport project, and the one which I mostly spoke of in my lecture was motivated in part by our joint love of and frustrations with trains and train travel.

In our book *Train Tracks: Work, Play and Politics on the Railways* (Letherby & Reynolds, 2005), we drew on accounts from 100+ respondents – commuters, leisure passengers, rail workers of various kinds and rail enthusiasts – and on our own experience and argued that the train is not just a vehicle that gets us from A to B but a place and space in its own right. Thus, social life happens on the train (and in the railway station) and the railways are also subject to political discussion and nostalgic representation. With specific reference to our own interests and involvement, we wrote:

> Extending the auto/biographical, we are ourselves included in the respondent group, explicitly making use of the fact that all research is in some ways auto/biographical …. We have attempted a grounded analysis that, of course is influenced by our own experiences and views, both as respondents and as researchers. As such we acknowledge the intellectual and political presence of the researcher at all stages of the research process …. (Letherby & Reynolds, 2005, p. 21)

> Our own affection and frustration with trains and train travel have intensified through data collection and writing. It has even begun to structure the gifts we buy each other: for example, a London and North Eastern mouse mat; a birthday book complete with copies of railway posters; an Australian tea towel …. (Letherby & Reynolds, 2005, p. 3).

In addition to other social differences we focused in our analysis on the gendered experience of train travel and indeed were reminded, at conferences and in reviews of our work, of the, it appeared, unusualness of our interest in this area as two women. The significance of gender in the data and to our status as 'railway researchers' led to our next project together, an edited book entitled *Gendered Journey's, Mobile Emotions* (Letherby & Reynolds, 2009) which included, alongside several traditional academic chapters, a number of autobiographical pieces focusing on issues as diverse as cycling, hitchhiking, road-rage, taxi-driving, researching boy-racers and running. As I have noted elsewhere:

In addition to travel and transport the two concepts we asked contributors to consider in their writing were gender and emotion. Gender is sometimes assumed to be a reflection on 'women' and 'women's issues' but it is equally important to consider the social and cultural expectations, behaviours and relationships of males as well as females. Thus, a thorough understanding of gender has to consider both femininities and masculinities, the range of ways in which these can be expressed and the interrelationship between gender and other signifiers of social difference (age, class, 'race', dis/ability and sexuality and so on). In addition gender is not merely something that we 'have' but rather needs to be understood more fluidly as something that is re/constructed (Letherby, 2010, p. 162).

In my lecture I spoke about all of these things with the intension of highlighting the significance of the sociological imagination to understanding train (and other) travel and to show how my own experience with reference to travel, transport and related issues are significance to both my personal and sociological biographies.

## Case Study Two: Social Theory in Action

Social Theory in Action was a final year module (compulsory within a single honours sociology undergraduate degree) that I constructed and led for eight years.

Whilst teaching this module spoke about my own research and methodological experiences throughout and in some of the sessions which focused specifically on research examples I, and some of my colleagues (which included doctoral students as well as full time lecturers) focused specifically on research we had undertaken in order to demonstrate the relationship between the process and the product of research and the relationship between the research produced and (potential/possible/actual) impact. Students were encouraged to reflect on the significance of auto/biography to their own development as scholars with specific reference to their work for this module and more generally. We also watched films and YouTube clips, listened to music and read and talked about work outside of the mainstream

sociology reading lists. So, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the film *12 Angry Men* helped us to consider both 'whose meanings matter' and 'the significance of biographical difference' and we reflected on the different ways that sociological research findings can be presented whilst watching short films highlighting songs and poems as 'outputs'. Overall we used our 'sociological imaginations' to further our understanding of the social world and how it can be studied.

In writing about her own experience of using auto/biography in teaching Ribbens (1993, p. 88, original emphasis) argues:

> A critical and reflexive form of autobiography has the sociological potential for considering the extent to which our subjectivity is not something that gets in the way of our social analysis but is itself social … I would suggest that the key point is that 'society' can be seen to be, not 'out there', but precisely *located 'inside our heads'*, that is, in our socially located and structured understandings of 'my-self', 'my-life', 'me-as-a-person', and so forth.

With this in mind, I not only encouraged students to engage with the auto/biographical work of others but to reflect on the significance of their own intellectual and personal personhood in assessments. Amongst other areas this led to class presentations and written assignments focusing on the auto/biographical sociological meanings of a bedroom; personhood and social media and how admiration for a particular footballer can help us to understand the significance of gender and celebrity in historical and cultural terms.

## Additional Creative Auto/Biographical Endeavours and Practices

Richardson (2001, pp. 34–37 original emphasis) reminds us that '*People who write are always writing about their lives'* whether they admit it or not, and that '*Writing is a method of discovery*, a way of finding out about yourself and your world'. Richardson turned to life writing following a car accident before which she taught advanced statistics. She wrote:

Although I could not bring into speech what was happening in my head, I found that I could write about it. If I could not find the word I wanted, I could write its first letter or leave a blank space. In writing, the pace and the issues were my own … Writing allowed me to record little thoughts, to revisit them and fill in the blanks, to piece them together, thought-by-thought. Writing gave me a feeling of control over time and space, and a faith that I would recover. Writing was the method through which I constituted the world and reconstituted myself. Writing became my principle tool through which I learned about myself and the world. I wrote so I would have a life. Writing was and is *how* I come to know. (Richardson, 2001, p. 33)

At the end of 2014 I left full-time academic work and now combine freelance research, supervision, examining and teaching with work as a Civil Celebrant (and other non-academic activities). I completed my training in Civil Celebrancy (which qualifies me to facilitate at non-religious and semi-religious namings, weddings, commitment, renewal of vows and funeral ceremonies) in October 2014.

The training itself was significant for me; life enriching and enhancing, not least because it helped me to make connections with, draw on and further develop skills acquired within my sociological undertakings and also my work as a nursery nurse. All of these occupations are people focused, are creative and require 'imagination'. Civil Celebrancy as an auto/biographical practice involves learning about and from the people whose lives are central to the ceremonies concerned.

Another, unexpected, legacy of the training has been my engagement with social media. Having previously only engaged in a lackluster way with my twitter account, I now have an additional twitter account, a Facebook account and I forward Blog entries from my webpage to both of these. In said Blog, I write about issues linked to Civil Celebrancy – e.g. clothing traditions and choices at weddings and funerals; cultural norms and superstitions; the important of place and space – more often than not with a sociological slant. I've also written of loss and bereavement and the practices and processes of griefwork as identified by Davidson (2008) as the work we do with others. Sometimes I include reference to some of the activities I have engaged in during my particular grief journeys in these writings. In a blog entry entitled *A Celebrant's Imagination: An Auto/Biographical Practice* I wrote:

Another way to think about both the sociologist's and the celebrant's imagination is through a focus on auto/biography. The / is important here. Auto/biography acknowledges that when we write and speak of the life of another aspects of our self (in terms of our views, opinions, experience, relationship with the person in question and so on) influence what we say. Similarly, when we write and speak about our own life the lives of others are significant in that we position ourselves as similar to, different from, influenced by (and so on) both historical and contemporary others. All of this is relevant to a celebrant's practice. There are other shared concerns such as the importance of ritual at significant points of the life course; a focus on identity and how this might differ, not least with reference to age, ethnicity, gender; and of course social networks and networking. (Letherby, 2016)

Engagement in social media is itself an auto/biographical practice of course and increasingly students and trainees (since leaving full-time university work I now also teach and facilitate courses focusing on the auto/biographical aspects of research for non-academic institutions) draw on and utilise such communication in their learning and coursework.

In addition to blogging I have in the last six years begun to experiment with different writing genres – including fiction and memoir writing – both within my academic writing and outside of it. I agree with Clifford (1986, p. 6) who suggests that the word 'fiction' no longer equals falsehood and the opposite of 'truth'. Frank (2000, pp. 484–485) adds:

That there are truths to be found in stories is inarguable. Similarly, there is always an element of interpretation in research, and every written text is a product or particular social, political, technical, economic and personal events.

There are many examples of other sociologists/social scientists working in the way. For example, in *Taking it Like a Woman* Ann Oakley (1984) uses a mixture of fact and fiction both of which are of course informed by *her* sociological

imagination. Oakley begins the book by acknowledging the relationship between her own life and those of others (both known to her and not):

> I have … tried self-consciously to draw together in this book some of the connecting threads between my life and the lives of others, between the issues that concern me and those that are of general concern to others. (Oakley, 1984, pp. 2–3)

Research suggests that music, art and drama and life-writing, fiction and poetry enable audiences to experience and understand their own and others' emotions (e.g. Diversi, 1998; Douglas & Carless, 2013; Sparkes, 2002; Vickers, 2014). As such creative approaches to data collection and presentation are further ways to work auto/biographically, to explore the relationship between auto/biography, history and structure and also have implications in terms of impact, likely as they are to reach a larger, broader audience. Writing about her own such work within public administration Vickers (2014, p. 181) writes:

> The use of fiction has been noted for its capacity to analyse and depict sensitive and difficult-to-uncover social phenomena, offering a most promising source of field material for instance, for studying sensitive issues that cannot be discussed in organisational life, such as discriminatory practices, or bullying … The creative writing shared here enabled me to explore complex issues, often identified by respondents but either not fully understood or not extensively articulated during the traditional interview.

In my work and writing on bereavement and loss (and elsewhere) I have begun to include fiction in my writing (e.g. Letherby, 2014, 2015, forthcoming) all of which is auto/biographical (drawing on my own and/or my respondents experiences). In addition to its usefulness in terms of 'data' representation, I also support the view that creativity within bereavement can be one result of and assist individuals through the grieving process (Bertman, 1999; Buser, Buser, & Gladding, 2015; Brennan, 2015; Letherby & Davidson, 2015). These activities then, although initially 'non-academic', have become significant to my scholarly self. This brings me full circle in that not only has the development of a sociological imagination influenced how I reflect on and perceive and live my life (both personally and professionally) but in turn it has affected my life choices and experiences. In the teaching and mentoring work that I continue to do, I stress this and encourage similar self-reflection in others.

## Some Final Reflections

Working in new areas and/or with a new approach is exciting but can be intellectually and emotionally dangerous (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000) and would be much harder without encouragement and supportive critique from others working similarly. I have been lucky that my career has taken place at a time where there has been a space for the 'auto/biographical I' (Stanley, 1993) and I have received enough support and encouragement not to be put off by the critique. I also believe in what I do as thoroughly sociological, both substantively, methodologically and epistemologically. Having decided not to take the advice of the reviewer of one of

my first articles to remove the auto/biographical reference in case this personal revelation was 'used against me', I have had my approach criticised on various occasions. I appreciate that students may be wary of working in this way in case their work is viewed as 'self-indulgent', 'self-advertisement', 'unacademic'; all criticisms I have received.

In the 1980s, Stanley and Wise (1983) suggested that feminist researchers and scholars need to be 'brave' and to challenge academic conventions in terms of writing style and approach – drawing on Audre Lorde they said 'you cannot dismantle the master's house using the master's tools' – in their second edition *Breaking Out Again* however they defended their decision to write in the specialist language of postmodernism and post-structuralist social science arguing that as academic feminism has become professionalised and accepted by the mainstream and the malestream 'it has become necessary to participate in its language games in order to be taken seriously as a member of the epistemic community' (1993, p. 231). With reference to my creative feminist auto/biographical approach, I am still drawn to Stanley and Wise's first piece of advice as such work is not only academically rigorous and honest but also emotionally, politically and I think theoretically powerful.

And yet, vulnerability remains. A few years ago, I was asked to write a chapter focusing on my feminist auto/biographical approach. After explaining my justification for it, I included a very short (200 words) piece of fiction that I'd recently written but was told by the book's editor to take this out as it was 'surplus' to my argument. I think this is a shame for as suggested above performative methods and approaches not only engage our bodies as well as our minds (Douglas & Carless, 2013), but they also have the potential for engagement and impact well beyond our discipline boundaries.

Across my publications over the last 24 years, it is possible to piece together a fairly clear picture of my life, interests and concerns, should one want to. Recently I have begun to write about some issues that have been a little more challenging to share; not least because of the possible response to these revelations (see e.g. Letherby, 2014). I have always suggested that writers (including students) should only share personal details that they what want to and I have always remembered how following an early presentation as a PhD student one participant asked me if it might be harder to share experience, beliefs, etc., that others might view less than sympathetically. Thus, although I have suggested in this chapter and encourage students to accept that all our work is in some ways auto/biographical, and that auto/biographical work is in fact putting the 'sociological imagination' into practice, all auto/biography is partial and includes silences and gaps which are themselves significant.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. How important has your own autobiography been to your professional development as a learner and teacher, researcher and writer?
2. What challenges have you faced in our own teaching and scholarly work? How have you responded to these challenges?

3. How might consideration of issues of difference and diversity (i.e. sex and gender; dis/ability, 'race' and ethnicity and so on) assist us in the development of our sociological imaginations?
4. What non-academic sources do you or might you find useful to encourage students to develop and use their own sociological imaginations?

## Appendix 1

The aims of the module where:

- To build on students' understanding of social theories and conceptual approaches.
- To critically assess debates in the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of science.
- To draw connections between developments in social theory and in research methods.
- To further develop the application of theoretical ideas to contemporary issues in society.

At the end of a module the learner was expected to be able to:

- Analyse the contribution social theory can make to understanding the nature of knowledge.
- Demonstrate a thorough understanding and ability to relate social theory to research practice.
- Demonstrate an understanding and ability to analyse current debates within the sociology of science.
- Synthesise theoretical debates in social theory about knowledge with those relating to research methods.
- Apply theoretical debates to contemporary social issues.

The module included a mixture of 'theory' focused weeks and 'research' based weeks. The theory weeks were based around four main themes, thus:

*Thinking Sociologically, Revisiting the Sociological Imagination (2 lectures)*

*Whose Knowledge, What Knowledge?*:
Knowledge and Power (I lecture)
The Sociology of Knowledge, Knowledge of Sociology (I lecture)
Challenges to Knowledge and Paradigms; diversification or fragmentation? (I lecture)
From Standpoint Epistemologies to Post-modern Theories (I lecture)

*What Is This Thing Called Science?*:
Science (and technology) as the New 'Religion', Science as 'Truth'(I lecture)
Science and Sociology, Friends and/or Enemies (I lecture)

*Politics and Practice*:
Research as Theory in Action (I lecture)
From Objectivity to Theorised Subjectivity (I lecture)
'Making Research Count' (I lecture)

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# Chapter 11
# Doing Public Sociology in the Classroom

**Christopher R. Matthews**

**Abstract** Within this chapter, I explore the manner in which public sociology might be usefully employed to enhance teaching and learning. After arguing for an orientation to teaching that centralises students' experiences by 'starting from where they are', I outline three practical stages in the doing of public sociology in the classroom. These overlapping stages are important as a means of supporting the development of foundational skills that enable more challenging work towards the end of undergraduate study. In conclusion, I suggest that by integrating elements of public sociology across a curriculum colleagues can enhance their degree programme in terms of employability, engagement and student satisfaction. I also suggest that this process offers some key avenues for tackling some of the pressures and challenges that sociology faces as a discipline.

## Introduction

When I conducted my PhD, there was very little pressure placed on me to engage in any sort of public engagement. While I reported my findings at a number of conferences and within academic publications, I did not attempt to write about my work in a manner that would be accessible to non-academics, nor did I make policy recommendations or feed my results back to any governing bodies or government agencies. Perhaps this was a product of the expectation that I, as with the majority of those who hold an advanced degree in sociology, would go on to work in the 'ivory towers' of academia rather than the 'real' world? Perhaps this was a manifestation of the lack of sociologists' voices in shaping debates around public policy? Whatever the reason, this has left me with a personal motivation to

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develop a thread of activism connected to my research and to develop my ability to meaningfully contribute to public issues.[1]

Thinking and working through this process in relation to my own work has highlighted to me the important potential that public sociology has for our students in terms of skill development, employability and creating interesting learning and teaching opportunities. And as higher education becomes an increasingly competitive and marketised space, I argue that in feeding public sociology into our learning and teaching sociologists can mark out and lay claim to the development of students' employability in a more explicit manner.

In this chapter, I reflect on some of my thoughts around this topic and provide some practical examples and suggestions that might be useful for those wishing to use such ideas in their teaching, learning and curriculum development. To do this, I offer insight into how lecturer/learner relationships can be recast to provide a more practical and engaged education. In conclusion, I make a call for colleagues to tackle some of the pressures and challenges that sociology faces as a discipline by considering the examples I present when conducting curriculum reviews and development. To provide some context let me briefly discuss public sociology and how we might want to consider it in relation to our teaching.

## Genuinely Student-Centred Public Sociology

Public sociology, as proposed by Burawoy (2004), has provided a contemporary focal point for academics wishing to engage in what might previously have been understood as activism, public debate, policy creation, action-orientated research and collaborative research. Burawoy (2004, p. 104) argues that we need to bring sociology to people and groups beyond academia in order to promote 'dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope'. He continues:

> What is important here is the multiplicity of public sociologies, reflecting the multiplicity of publics – visible and invisible, thick and thin, active and passive, local, national and even global, dominant and counter publics. The variety of publics stretches from our students to the readers of our books, from newspaper columns to interviews, from audiences in local civic groups such as churches or neighbourhoods, to social movements we facilitate. The possibilities are endless. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 104)

This call to action has been met by many sociologists conducting research in a variety of fields and has aided the process of re-establishing our discipline as a central voice in public debates (see Nyden, Hossfeld, & Nyden, 2012 for a collection of examples).

Alongside this impetus in research a number of institutions in Europe (Humboldt State University, Nottingham Trent University, Queen Margaret University) and

[1]This is most clearly demonstrated in my work with Alex Channon on the Love Fight Hate Violence project – LFHV.org – and within my development of LGBTQI boxing spaces.

America (American University Washington, Baker University, University of the Rockies, University of North Carolina Wilmington) now offer degree programmes in public sociology. And at a personal level, while organising and speaking at a number of British Sociological Association Teaching Group regional conferences, I have had interesting discussions with many colleagues who have weaved elements of public sociology into their teaching and learning. It appears, whether explicitly or not, that Burawoy's (2004) comments have formed the basis from which some colleagues are developing interesting and well-recruiting degree programmes.

Yet, it is important to think through what we mean when we talk about public sociology and, specifically when considering teaching, whose public sociology we are doing in the classroom. Burawoy (2004) points to students as the most readily available public for whom scholars have access. Indeed, Persell (2009) argues that teaching may be the most commonly practiced form of public sociology. A shallow reading of these ideas can result in academics considering students as the *recipients* of public sociology rather than as a group with whom one might *do* public sociology. The former orientation might align well with the self-focus that is often required and developed in successful PhD researchers and many academics. However, it is also at odds with what many students require from their degree programmes. Furthermore, it stunts the potential that understanding students as active participants in sociology can have for generating powerful learning experiences.

Burawoy (2004, p. 9, emphasis added) provides a useful point of departure for developing such considerations when he envisaged teaching and public sociology in a nuanced and genuinely student (public) centred manner:

> With the aid of our grand traditions of sociology, we turn their private troubles into public issues. We do this by engaging their lives not suspending them; *starting from where they are*, not from where we are. Education becomes a series of dialogues on the terrain of sociology that we foster — a dialogue between ourselves and students, between students and their own experiences, among students themselves, and finally a dialogue of students with publics beyond the university.

The key for Burawoy appears to be a shift in the ways that higher education has traditionally been framed. As academics are largely employed for their specialist knowledge on specific topics we often feel very passionate about our areas of research. This personal investment can provide a great starting point from which we can develop engaging and interesting lectures and assessment strategies. We also tend to feel more comfortable lecturing on the ideas that we hold closest to us. Indeed, our students commonly expect, and even demand, that we are experts in a myriad of topics (in a later section of this chapter I discuss how such expectations might be managed).

When these issues are combined with the power dynamics that often frame social interactions in the classroom, such as those between lecturer/learner, expert/novice, senior/junior, we can begin to see a tension between traditional academic lecturing and the dialogical teaching that Burawoy envisaged. And the result is that the vast majority of higher education still 'starts from where we are'. But in 'starting from where they are' it is possible to deconstruct and recast the process of teaching and learning in a manner that is weighted more favourably towards

student's lives, interests and the skills they need in order to develop their critical thinking, career pathways and ultimately their ability to gain employment.

In 'starting from where they are' it is possible to begin to work with *their* emotional connections to certain social worlds and phenomena. Widdowfield (2000) and Askins (2009) have explored this in relation to situating the emotions in research. I find such ideas useful as a means of helping students examine issues that they care about. Indeed, during the collection of module feedback, students have told me that some of their most powerful learning experiences came as a result of feeling empowered to critically explore topics that they are emotionally invested in.

Connecting in this manner to students' emotional lives is an important way that we can produce an interesting 'hook' for our academic arguments and discussions of more abstract theoretical ideas. And while it would be overly simplistic to consider this as a process of developing *their* public sociology rather than *ours*, working towards such a shift does help to undermine the unequal power dynamic of traditional, university-style education. This is not a new pedagogical idea and many readers will report the success they have had using variations upon such a theme; yet, in re-articulating this focus using public sociology Burawoy provides an important point of departure for scholars who are interested in developing a range of powerful and practical learning opportunities.

A further way of conceptualising this process was neatly captured by my co-editor and colleague, Alex Channon, who, while we were considering the teaching and learning for a new module, argued for the development of 'a sociology *for'* rather than 'a sociology *of*'. Here, rather than focusing on sociology as a means of understanding a given topic the focus shifts to a sociology that is useful *for* people (publics) who have an interest or work in a particular setting, vocation or career. A sociology *for* would provide practical toolkits for understanding, doing and effecting change based on a sociological understanding.

It is then possible to provide more explicit opportunities for our students to develop sociological knowledge and tools that have a practical resonance with their lives and potential future careers. There is a neat link here between Burawoy's discussion of the need for a dialogue with our students about the terrain for public sociology and a commitment to developing our students' practical usage of the sociological imagination. Here we have a practical public sociology developed for usage in areas and environments that our students care about and feel are important, interesting and useful for their careers. And I argue that aligning in this way with the increasingly important 'employability agenda' sociologists will have more tools available to them in terms of degree recruitment and student retention.

## The Process of Doing Public Sociology in the Classroom

The preceding thoughts act as a broad framework that has shaped my teaching and curriculum development in line with some central ideas drawn from public sociology and my personal pedagogical approach. Building on this, the following

practical examples aim to provide colleagues with clear examples to stimulate their own usage of public sociology in the classroom. These examples are based on my implementation of such ideas on a degree programme that I lead at the University of Brighton. This is not a sociology degree, and while social scientific thinking takes a central place within the academic study, it is important to draw attention to this context as it highlights the potential embedded in deploying public sociology outside of the sociology departments and programmes.

Importantly, my leadership role has afforded me the space to develop the degree across all three years of study, thereby contextualising and structuring learning for students over time. This provides a coherence and logical progression that is essential for all teaching, but especially so when attempting to develop the critical thinking skills and knowledge that is useful for doing public sociology. As such, I will outline three broad and overlapping stages that encourage students to gradually and progressively develop their abilities. These ideas can map neatly onto the first, second and third years of study during an undergraduate programme; however, readers might want to reconsider this ordering to suit their own students' characteristics and needs.

## Personalising the Sociological Imagination as the Basis for Public Sociology

As with all educational processes it is important to begin working with our students at the appropriate level. There are many elements of sociology that undergraduate students struggle to grasp due to lack of prior learning, lack of life experiences or the novelty and/or complexity of theoretical ideas. As such, initial steps down the pathway towards public sociology should be taken slowly and with lots of direction. A good start point for this is to focus on developing students' abilities to use sociological concepts and ideas to help understand elements of their own lives. Again, this is not a new idea within teaching and learning, but it is important to discuss this initial stage as it can encourage our students to begin to see the practical potential embedded in the sociological imagination.

When I meet students in the first semester of their undergraduate programme, I encourage them to personalise the ideas I present to them. I discuss this as part of an informal teacher/learner contract where I set out what they can expect from me and what I expect from them. Following this, I regularly weave personal stories into my lecturing on foundational sociological ideas. A favourite I use at the moment is connected to ideas around the 'quantified self'. For this topic, I show them a display from my Strava account (a social media technology that is used to track one's running and cycling). Unpicking my modest yet incrementally improving performances opens up issues around disciplining bodies, big data and the rationalisation of (what should be enjoyable) physical activity, in a potentially amusing manner. Most students are able to relate this example to their own lives and, as such, this begins the process of them seeing the sociological imagination as something that has a practical utility.

Building on such examples, I set tasks were they have to relate ideas from lectures and readings to their interests, pastimes and personal experiences. The key here is to provide them with opportunities to bring themselves into their studies. The following is an example of a group task I set in the first few weeks of starting their undergraduate studies:

> Based on your assigned reading of the extract from C. Wright Mills, work in small groups to develop a presentation about (1) a **public issue** which can be understood using sociological ideas and (2) provide anecdotal evidence from **personal problems** to help bring your presentation 'to life'.

The students develop this task during the course of three seminars; this enables them to work together under my supervision to find accessible sociological research that speaks to some of their personal experiences. The presentation of this work back to the class offers further pedagogical opportunities as the students learn from each other's attempts to personalise sociology. In carving out this sort of space for students to explore sociology on *their* terrain we can begin to develop the dialogical teaching that Burawoy highlighted.

When asking students to draw on their personal (potentially emotional) experiences and problems it is not uncommon for challenging and powerful stories to be discussed. I am not one to shy away from the appropriate use of such ideas within teaching and learning but certain safeguards must be considered (see Lowe in this book for further discussions around this topic). It is essential, then, that the classroom in which such tasks are being developed is a safe and respectful space. This is especially the case when working with first year students who have come from a variety of different educational settings with different social norms and behavioural standards.

Once such a safe space has been created, our students will feel far more comfortable discussing their own lives and relating these experiences to important sociological ideas. This can also be accompanied by discussions around the nature of subjective experiences and differences in biography to help develop empathic thought processes that will be useful for working with different publics. When done in a sensitive manner, such personalised learning experiences can provide a great foundation for our students' attempts to work with and for different publics.

## Producing Ideas for Different Publics

We spend a lot of time developing our students' abilities to discuss ideas in an 'academic style'. And while there is much debate around what constitutes such a style, the process of learning the skills associated with academia are one of the hallmarks of higher education. While key skills are developed when developing such an approach, many of our students will seldom draw on their abilities to write, present and produce ideas using academic language in their chosen careers. Moreover, it is surely conceivable to imagine a process whereby the ability to

produce ideas for non-academic audiences might suffer as our students spend so much time and effort crafting the skills we academics find to be important.

Some will undoubtedly disagree with my position here, but what is clear to me is the importance that should be placed on encouraging our students to develop the ability to express intellectual ideas in an accessible and efficient manner for various publics outside of academia. This is also clearly an important dimension of developing skills that align neatly with an essential dimension of public sociology. This synergy is the basis from which I have worked with students to help them produce ideas for different publics.

There are two key elements that I consider to be central in organising strategies that help students work with these ideas. Firstly, it is important to consider the appropriate medium for presenting different ideas to different publics. For example, how might we best spread ideas about health inequality to diverse populations? Or how could we effectively promote positive body images in a digital age? Thinking through the practicalities of how, and in what ways, we translate academic research and concepts is an interesting pedagogical exercise and requires students to engage in a process of empathising with different subjective positions.

Secondly, it is important that there is an internal consistency between such considerations and the manner in which our students deliver their work. Spending time developing the ability to align the medium and content of ideas provides further pedagogical exercises, interesting dimensions to assessments and, perhaps most importantly, is a skill that can be of use in a variety of careers and workplaces.

For students to develop the internal consistency between the idea and the media of representation, it is essential that we provide interesting and thought-provoking examples. In this sense, social media has been argued to be an effective teaching and writing tool (see Edgington & Wilton, 2018) and I have used the Twitter hashtag #EverydaySexism, which has been developed by the Everyday Sexism campaign (see Bates, 2016), as a hook to help students get into such ideas:

The #Everydaysexism campaign effectively highlights the often taken for granted, unthinking and embodied nature of unequal gender relations. It is a great example of feminist social theory being translated into an easily understood and quickly distributed idea. Building on this example, students can be asked to work

in groups to research and deconstruct a variety of other such examples. Here, students are able to develop the skills needed to distilling key information and presenting it with simplicity and clarity with the specific needs of different publics in mind.

I prefer to produce student engagement through interesting teaching and empowering students, yet, it is also important to accept that many students will attempt to work strategically towards specific learning outcomes. As such, weaving this style of teaching throughout a module and ensuring it is a central element of the assessment can ensure 'buy in' from those more strategically minded learners. The following is an extract from an assessment brief that I have used in the past:

> **Task One** – Take one or more of the themes we have discussed in this module and reproduce them for a non-academic audience of your choosing. Your work could take the form of a blog, activism campaign, artistic representation, poster, journalistic or fiction writing, satirical or comic representation and other appropriate styles. We will explore examples of such work within the module and you will be expected to discuss your idea with a module tutor at least three weeks before the assessment is due.
>
> **Task Two** – Write a discussion about the theme(s) you have chosen to reproduce. You will be expected to outline the academic basis for your work by including references to relevant literature. Building on this you should outline a coherent logic that explains and justifies the medium and delivery of your ideas. Why have you chosen to do what you have done in the way that you have done it? Why does this fit with the population you have chosen to target?

Such tasks can require a lot of effort from students who are used to more prescriptive and less practically minded assessments. In order to support students, I provide lots of opportunities for them to develop their ideas during seminars and workshops. Here we discuss ways in which lecturing material might be effectively communicated to different groups. Providing realistic scenarios for students to work through is very useful; for example, asking them how they might go about highlighting gentrification to local residents, or workplace inequality to their colleagues at work. Taking such concrete examples and working them through to a conclusion in a group workshop can really aid students' abilities to present ideas in a manner which can often be outside of the knowledge base and comfort zone of academics. And it is here, by working from 'where they are' and where different publics might be, that we can enhance and unleash our students' powers to creatively work with and for different publics and to move beyond some of the inertia that can sometimes accompany dry academic debates.

## Doing Sociology with Publics Beyond the University

There is a general expectation that our final year students are able to handle more complex theoretical and conceptual ideas. While this if often the case, and I have been impressed by how many of my students have grasped some of the finer points of social theory, I often reflect on the manner in which such knowledge

will be of direct use for them in their chosen careers. Yes, these ideas can be useful for their own personal development in terms of reading social situations, and sharpening critical thinking, but in terms of direct application in the workplace and for developing their own employability it can often be challenging for students to see the practical dimensions that can accompany such knowledge. Yet, it is possible to help our students to realise and develop the potential for such sociological ideas by weaving into our teaching and assessments a commitment to working with publics beyond the University. This can provide clear practical examples for our students to draw upon when applying for jobs and helps them demonstrate that they can pragmatically deploy their academic knowledge.

In this final stage of doing public sociology in the classroom our students are putting their skills into practice. As many students will be working in this practical way for the first time it is important that enough space is given over to them to explore examples of such work and to create their own ideas. As such, when working in this way, I usually divide the hours I spend with them equally between lecturing about new empirical and theoretical content, seminars which focus on critical evaluations of interventions, and workshops, tutorials and discussion groups where students are able to develop their own ideas. This shift de-emphasises lecturing as the central feature of a module and refocuses the lecturer's role to produce and support a dialogue between key academic themes, students' interests and practical outcomes.

When splitting teaching time in such a manner, it is important to firstly manage our own expectations about how much academic content can be covered. Developing teaching and learning in the manner I am describing places different pressures and expectations on students and requires a shift in the types of support we provide. In carving out working and thinking time for this process, it is essential to pare back either the depth or volume of ideas that would normally be covered when teaching is orientated around the traditional lecture/reading format. It can be challenging at first to 'let go' of themes and lectures that we as scholars find important, but it is essential to remember that this process is about supporting our students' development in directions that are useful and important to them, rather than being solely dictated by us.

A second potential issue comes in the form of managing students' expectations of the teaching process. I have found that when reducing the amount of 'chalk and talk' some students find the increased need for them to become actively engaged in their own learning to be challenging. This breakdown of the traditional 'I talk, you listen' dynamic can be disconcerting for some. I have found that such issues can be managed by outlining the positive reasons for this style of teaching, highlighting the differences in what the students can expect from you and in return what you expect from them, drawing attention to employability opportunities that are embedded in this process, and finally, by offering extra support and guidance for students who are less comfortable learning in such a fashion. When this is done, the vast majority of students in the final year of their studies are able to see the importance of recasting the learning process in this manner as a means of supporting their development of key skills and increasing their ability to gain employment.

When working in this way with students at the University of Brighton, I have used our Community and University Partnership Programme (CUPP) as a means of setting a practical scenario for assessments. CUPP keeps a record of all the projects it helps to set up; this information highlights how university staff have been working with community partners to develop social justice campaigns, small businesses, funding bids and a variety of other activities. This gives my students a great chance to see practical examples of academic knowledge being used in real-world situations. As such, I am able to use the CUPP application forms and supporting documents in the following assessment:

> You have been approached by an organisation that is seeking an academic partner to support their development of a programme that will tackle a pressing social issue. Together you have decided to apply for CUPP funding.
>
> **Task One** – Complete a short review of literature around the key academic themes that underpin your project. This work should clearly highlight the social issue that you and your community partner are interested in.
>
> **Task Two** – Building on your literature review develops a CUPP funding bid that is designed to help you and your partner develop a project around the theme you are interested in. Your bid should be completed using the current CUPP application form and provide the required supporting documents.

This assessment ensures that students can work on an area that they have some interest in. It also encourages them to consider the issues within this topic in line with the needs and motivations of a specific group. And finally, by developing a funding bid for a project based on academic literature they are pulling together skills in a manner that is extremely valuable and applicable to life beyond the campus.

## Concluding Remarks

The preceding examples of how I have developed some elements of public sociology in the classroom are meant to offer the reader some insights into how they could add such ideas into their teaching, learning and curriculum development. In this regard, I align with Nyden et al. (2012, p. 300) who conclude that:

> Preparing sociologists for engaged scholarship means rethinking the academic programs we currently offer to ensure graduates have the skill set needed to work outside academia, creating a curriculum that reflects the growing needs of the 21st century sociologist.

There are many imaginative and interesting ways that this could be done and I encourage colleagues to play around with some of these ideas while conducting curriculum reviews. I have presented the above examples as overlapping progressions because I consider such stages to be essential for students to confidently work in this publically engaged and practical manner. Without providing opportunities to think about personalising sociology and then empathising with different publics, I have found from experience that students often do not have an orientation to learning and assessments that aids them in doing public sociology. And while colleagues should not

be put off from including elements of public sociology in stand-alone modules, I certainly believe that a strategic and well thought out deployment of such ideas across all levels of an undergraduate programme can lead to a more positive learning experience.

In reconsidering teaching and learning in this style, sociologists can have a clear impact on our student's critical thinking skills and, as I have argued in this chapter, employability. This also provides a clear narrative during open days to help highlight to prospective students and their parents/guardians the different career opportunities that an undergraduate education in sociology can offer. I would argue that public sociology provides a useful fulcrum around which sociology as a discipline can meet some of the demands that changes to the structure of higher education are bringing. And while we must be critical of the marketisation of education and the undermining effects of neo-liberal agendas, as a discipline we must also not get caught on the sideline as other subjects continue to lay claim to and leverage the employability agenda.

As I have tried to show here, with some small changes in focus, aligned to public sociology, it is possible to develop teaching, learning and assessments that specifically work towards the use of the sociological imagination in real-world settings. In supporting our students' in this manner, we are not only developing their potential employability, we are also working towards maximising our discipline's potential to act as a foundational academic basis for public debate, public policy and community development.

I argue that degree programmes that draws on some of these themes and ideas will be well placed to offer learning experiences that are engaging, challenging and enjoyable, while also encouraging the development of crucial practical skills that are essential for enhancing employability. It is easy to dismiss the need for such changes as the negative results of shifts in the educational system towards neo-liberal agendas. But as I have previously argued (Matthews, 2014), the 'brave new world' of academia, while filled with problems and issues, might also provide an impetus to bring students' experiences and needs more fully to the centre of teaching and learning. For me, this is something that sociology as a discipline should be leading the way on, and I suggest the preceding ideas and examples as a basis from which colleagues might want to consider this in their own degree programmes.

## Suggested Discussion Points

1. What sociological themes shape the lives of your students most acutely, how could these be used to engage them?
2. What local organisations or groups could you work with to help your students consider the utility of the sociological imagination outside of the classroom?
3. How can you help your students conduct assessment work that will have clear and practical resonance with life outside of academia?
4. What examples from work within your department/colleagues could you use to illustrate the potential for public sociology?

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