

Chapter 5

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

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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 values 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 disciplinary 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 through 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 writing¹ 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 finish 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

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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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