Higher Education Close Up 8: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU8 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 18-20th July 2015. The theme of the conference is *Locating Social Justice in Close-Up Research in Higher Education* and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website: http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/hecu8/index.htm

Higher Education and Social Justice: Asking the 'Education Questions'

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Over the last decade or so, the framing of 'social justice' has become more prominent in deliberations on (higher) education and society. This stance considers the distribution of wealth (and related aspects of wellbeing) in society as a matter of justice. In contexts like the USA and the UK, social justice stands in for a broad critique of the neoliberal political project which has been associated with an erosion of public institutions and an increase in income inequality –a rolling back of the post-war commitments of the social welfare state. In these contexts of relatively high participation in higher education, questions around how class continues to impact on educational experiences and life opportunities have not been resolved, with elite institutions continuing to draw largely from middle and upper classes (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001) and 'widening participation' remaining more a policy statement than an empirical reality. In post-apartheid South Africa, it is relatively recent that 'social justice' has entered the lexicon of higher education scholarship (see Hlalele & Alexander, 2012; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2011) and this can be associated with a growing sense that the democratic government has not been able to address the inherited inequities from colonial and apartheid times – both access and success to higher education remain skewed by race (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001). This has been signalled powerfully by recent national student protests under the banner of #feesmustfall.

A social justice stance on higher education provides the starting point for an important critique recognising that the purposes of education have been captured by a narrow view which sees these predominantly in instrumental and economic terms, focusing attention on issues of efficiency with educational outcomes characterised in 'evidence-based' terms. In a broader sense the flagging of social justice also links with calls by Andrew Sayer and others for the bringing back in of normative concerns to social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Sayer, 2011). Working from a global South perspective, it is important to consider Amartya Sen's (2011) critique of the concept of social justice as brought into contemporary times by John Rawls (1971). In short, Sen finds Rawl's abstract ideal notion of limited utility when faced with real world contexts, where ideals are seldom attained but the necessity for moral judgements is important. Sen has offered what seems to me a more 'close-up' notion of

social justice, that grounded in his conceptualisation of human flourishing – the possibility for humans to accomplish things that they value doing in life. This conceptualisation has been taken up in educational scholarship, most notably by Martha Nussbaum and Melanie Walker (Nussbaum, 2003; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). There is an immediate appeal in that human flourishing feels so close to an intrinsic understanding of the purposes of education. Nonetheless, I think it is important to note that Sen is writing from an economic perspective and that there is a risk again of falling into the trap of focusing primarily on extrinsic purposes of education.

I therefore want to go a step further in the context of our HECU deliberations, to ask about the further work that we might do in order to take forward the notion of social justice into our engagements with higher education. Here I have found productive the simple challenge posed in a recent keynote by Sharon Todd (2015), who challenged an audience of education scholars to be sure that they are asking educational questions. It is important for higher education studies to be located in a broader understanding of contemporary society but at the same time important not to lose sight of the very specific role that higher education is mandated to play in society. This specific role is centred on knowledge – on the conservation and transmission of society's store of knowledge and on the critical engagement with and adding to that store. Higher education is centred on producing highly educated people – students and staff - who are able to grapple with the most challenging questions of the day. Thus as a starting point it is important to recognise the significant work that has been done by Stephanie Allais and others to critique the centring of economic purposes for higher education (Allais, 2012). The evidence is clear that political and economic problems need solutions from that sector, and that education cannot be assumed to solve a problem that is not of its making.

So then, what are the *educational* questions that need attention? There is a rich emerging literature on the public good purposes of higher education and here, I suggest, is a more nuanced framing of the normative that we need to guide our deliberations (see, for example, Lagemann & Lewis, 2011; Marginson, 2011; Nixon, 2011). I would argue that our imaginations have been so captured by the market discourse that these days it is hard even to lay out a position on the intrinsic purposes of higher education. If we start with a conception of human flourishing, then might it not even suffice to say that a fundamental human drive is to learn and to grow – and that human society should surely be centred on knowledge and knowing? A society that lacks ideas is one of the most impoverished types and the tragedy of our contemporary discourse is the spectre of TINA – There Is No Alternative. The contemporary world faces significant social and environmental challenges and if a university is not an incubator for new ideas then the future will indeed be dire. At the individual level young people go out into conditions of what some term late modernity, a time of fast-paced change and fluidity of norms. Higher education holds the potential to foster sophisticated reflexivity (Archer, 2012) and an ability to engage deeply with ideas, which graduates are going to need to draw on in making their important contributions to a changing world.

Currently there is a growing scholarship tracking the dramatic expansion of participation in higher education, particularly in Asia over recent times (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). The trend seems unstoppable and driven mainly by aspirations of families than by government fiat (Carnoy, Froumin, Loyalka, & Tilak, 2014; Marginson, in press). These are times to make sure the questions we are asking of higher education are not trapped in thinking of the past. To what degree can institutions formulated to produce an elite be reformed to meet the needs of a different world? What knowledge(s) is important for inclusion in the contemporary curriculum and how should it be arranged? How can we disrupt the well-established causal patterns whereby middle class cultural capital is a hidden requirement for success in higher education? How can we offer high quality higher education in financially constrained times? In an unequal society, how can a truly inclusive higher education be developed (can it?)? With regard to this latter question, in South Africa there is an emerging line of scholarship referenced earlier that uses Sen's conceptualisation of social justice to critically evaluate the arrangements for access to higher education as well as to ask questions about whether foundation (extended degree) programmes remain an appropriate response to these challenges. Further work will no doubt emerge in the wake of the seismic upheavals of 2015.

With regard to addressing the central educational questions of the day, I want to argue that the contribution of close-up research remains completely undervalued. Sadly this is a world that wants metrics, rankings and statistical correlations. In higher education I would be bold to say that yet another study which shows how students with high levels of motivation/self-efficacy/self-regulation tend to perform better academically is really a waste of everyone's time. There are important questions that are not being addressed, partly because these require an audience sophisticated enough to understand complex causality. Researchers need to be able to build explanatory accounts which draw on close-up data but in analysis are able to locate it carefully in its historical and social context. We need to find ways to work with large sets of narrative data; to become more sophisticated in using observational and documentary data; to learn to work comparatively across contexts in a close-up mode. We need to listen closely to student voices; at the same time we need more than ever to avoid the epistemic fallacy which takes people's accounts of the way things seem to be, to be the way they are. Crucially, there is much work to be done in interpreting findings and presenting these to multiple audiences. If the world out there has been raised on a diet of metrics and correlations, then the duty is going to fall to us as higher education scholars to raise the level of the conversation. I look forward to the contributions of HECU8 in this regard.

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