STUDIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The Paradox of Skills

Widening Participation, Academic Literacy & Students' Skills Centres

By
Linda Anne Barkas

SensePublishers

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STUDIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
Volume 11

Scope
This series addresses the many different forms of exclusion that occur in schooling across a range of international contexts and considers strategies for increasing the inclusion and success of all students. In many school jurisdictions the most reliable predictors of educational failure include poverty, Aboriginality and disability. Traditionally schools have not been pressed to deal with exclusion and failure. Failing students were blamed for their lack of attainment and were either placed in segregated educational settings or encouraged to leave and enter the unskilled labour market. The crisis in the labour market and the call by parents for the inclusion of their children in their neighbourhood school has made visible the failure of schools to include all children.

Drawing from a range of researchers and educators from around the world, Studies in Inclusive Education will demonstrate the ways in which schools contribute to the failure of different student identities on the basis of gender, race, language, sexuality, disability, socio-economic status and geographic isolation. This series differs from existing work in inclusive education by expanding the focus from a narrow consideration of what has been traditionally referred to as special educational needs to understand school failure and exclusion in all its forms. Moreover, the series will consider exclusion and inclusion across all sectors of education: early years, elementary and secondary schooling, and higher education.

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DEDICATION

In memory of my Father Edward John Bruce

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I have checked the text and references several times. I can only apologise if there are any errors I have overlooked.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> There are two things you should remember when dealing with parallel universes. One, they're not really parallel, and two; they're not really universes (Adams, quoted in Chown, 2007, 3).

INTRODUCTION

Physicists and cosmologists have long debated the complexity of the known and the unknown aspects of the universe but in 2010, they are no closer to a definitive answer on the origins of the cosmos. They are however, respectful of different theories even if they do not share the same views (Halsey, 1992). This courtesy, however, is not extended to the post-16 education sector, where one particular viewpoint, even if there is little, if any supporting evidence, appears to dominate. Unwin (2004b) uses the term a 'parallel universe' to explain how the prejudice to other areas of study has manifested in the thinking and attitudes of policy developments in relation to vocational, as against academic education. The issue of whether or not 'skills' exist in general contexts, surrounds both vocational and academic education, so I should like to refer again to Unwin's (2004b) term and develop this use of an analytical metaphor still further, and argue that in terms of different values, there are 'multi-verses' existing in higher education.

The discourse of skills is vastly complicated (see inter alia, Ainley 2000; Hyland, 2003; Unwin, 2009) so I shall focus my argument by examining how definitions of skills and teaching manifest in the discourse surrounding three of these multi-verses, namely the role of higher education; widening participation and students' skills centres. Each of these universes is made up of 'worlds' whereby the dominant ideas prevail in that particular world, without any consideration of opposing views that exist simultaneously. So the different views may as well, as Unwin (2004b) has shown, be in a parallel universe thus creating conflict and tension in universities, described by Winter (2009) as different schisms because managers and academics often have values that are incongruent to each other (Winter, 2009, 122).

The term *multi-verse* can symbolically capture the nature of the contradictory and conflicting language that exists in current thinking about the role and function of universities in modern society. Within each of these universes, there exist a number of different dimensions within 'worlds of thought' whereby the supporters of a viewpoint appear to genuinely believe their view is the only 'true reality'. They choose to appear, or their actions seem to suggest, they are oblivious to the existence of the thought forms that exist in any other dimension within their world. A viewpoint seems to dominate a line of action, as its supporters claim that their view is how 'their universe' exists; thereby dismissing as irrelevant the idea that there could, in fact, be other 'universes' with entirely different thoughts to their perceived

viewpoint (Ainley, 2000; Hyland, 2004; Kenny, 2009; Young and Muller 2010). The use of an analytical metaphor provides a mechanism to explore these diverse viewpoints to show how they impact, creating serious problems in the system, resulting in unintentional, impossible situations for academic staff working in SSCs.

The dimensional thoughts within worlds circulate around different 'suns' of core beliefs and so when debates take place about what role SSCs have in higher education, the empirical ideas underlying any given argument have fundamentally different starting points and definitions, so intention and meaning, becomes both 'lost in translation and lost in transmission' (Gee, 2000; Lum, 2004). As with any navigational system, whether they are on land, water, air or in outer-space, it is important to have a point of orientation, so for the purpose of organisation, the focal point in this book is academic literacy. Although the SSC was set up from within a 'skills agenda', students' queries at the SSC were not about study or employability skills, but were connected to how to write about the knowledge of a given subject, and this is termed 'academic literacy' (Hyland, 2004).

At the time of writing this book, the world was in the midst of a global economic recession. In early 2010, massive cuts to public services had been announced by the government. This was to mean the higher education budgets were to be decreased by at least 9% (Newman, 2010). Yet it was an entirely different story just over ten years ago. The National Inquiry into Higher Education, the Dearing Report, (1997) was the first major review of higher education since the Robbins Report of 1963. The Dearing Report (1997) emphasised the requirement for universities to provide more opportunities to widen participation in higher education. This Report was the first of many policies that government introduced to reshape the nature of higher education provision in England.

The book is aimed at researchers investigating the background to widening participation as it has developed over the past few decades. It may also be of interest to researchers examining the changing attitudes to learning and teaching in higher education. The purpose of the book is to highlight some 'snapshots in time' to show how key aspects of higher education policies and the related discourse impacted on the attitudes to students' learning in higher education. In response to these government policies, universities introduced many strategies to restructure and reorganise their educational courses. This book draws on a longitudinal study into one such measure, a centralised study skills centre, (SSC) to explore how the differentiated discourse surrounding the policies imposed to bring about changes to the higher education are both paradoxical and contradictory, resulting in disjointed and fragmented views of what is meant by an institution of 'higher learning'.

SSCs were widely adopted in post-1992 universities across the higher education sector, but not as much in the older, pre-1992 universities (Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey 2003). Wingate (2007) conducted a random search of the internet of 10 pre-1992 and 10 post-1992 universities and all but two of them offered some form of study support. This method of meeting students' learning needs is known as a 'bolt-on' approach (Bennett, Dunne and Carre, 2000) as against lecturers providing 'an embedded' process of guidance and instruction on how to learn and write about knowledge within the structure of a subject (Lea and Stierer, 2000). By exploring

how and why, the 'bolt-on' approach (Bennet et al., 2000) took such a hold in higher education; it is possible to see the strengthening of normalisation of beliefs through what Bernstein (2000) called the rise of genericism.

The 'snapshots in time' have been chosen because they explain how contradictory issues in learning and teaching were exposed through a 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967) application during the research into the SSC. Different views of what is meant by 'skills' and their application to learning were revealed through the study of the work of SSCs, that can be seen to reflect on a micro-scale, the larger challenges faced by universities. The challenges originate from four broad aspects of higher education. Firstly, how well universities have responded to governments demands to widen access, primarily over the past decade, and secondly, in the same time period, how the 'business language and idea' of higher education as a product to market, has replaced the value of 'knowledge' (Young, 2009).

The difficulties, however, in how universities actually 'deliver this higher education product' are either ignored or dismissed, and these issues are therefore, demonstrated in practical terms, in the third and fourth aspects of higher education. Thirdly, to serve the learning needs of all the extra students, universities have failed to sufficiently engage in working out what and how it was going to provide the extra help. Fourthly, in the rush for expansion of numbers, the needs of staff and the related disciplinary differences between subjects was totally overlooked. Superimposed on these four broad aspects are five complex dimensions: academic literacy, skills, knowledge, business and technology and teaching, that influence the four aspects through: the policy discourse, the changing role of universities, human and social capital theories, lifelong learning and access (See Table 4 in Chapter 2).

These competing ideologies of influence have therefore, resulted in paradoxes and ironies in higher education on a massive scale. There is extensive literature on each of these ideological aspects (See inter alia Ainley, 2000; Barnett, 1998; Bathmaker, 2007; Scott, 1998; Slee, 2001;), so the purpose in this book is to provide an introduction to some of them by explaining how the issues were 'grounded' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in the work of the SSC and how they were discovered over the decade of the longitudinal study. As the issues are vast and wide ranging, I have chosen to draw on the empirical evidence of the research to explore how the specific nature of the two main areas of conflict are inexplicably woven into all the other aspects of thinking about what it means to provided a 'higher education'. These two main areas of conflict are 'teaching' and 'skills'. I shall argue that the two main areas of conflict arise from disagreements surrounding the role of higher education in society; policies for widening participation and the introduction of centralised students' skills centres.

I shall draw on the research into an SSC to explain how these viewpoints caused problems for the staff working in the researched institution. Although in the past decade, many universities, have embraced different approaches to widening participation either by reviewing their minimum entry qualifications, and/or introducing subject specific, accredited writing modules (Preece and Godfrey, 2009; Wingate, 2007), at the time of the formal research, many universities still offered generic, study and writing services through centralised services (Thomas et al., 2003).

Perhaps the greatest irony of successful widening participation strategies in universities is the fact that SSCs still exist at all in 2010. In some institutions SSCs were set up in a desperate attempt to provide a unit that could provide 'help' to this ever increasing number of students, but no regard was given beforehand to deciding exactly what could possibly be offered in terms of 'help'. Concepts, definitions, boundaries and policies were not even conceived, let alone thought through. If they had been, the impossibility of such a service would have been identified. On the one hand, students, subject teaching staff and management, generally welcomed the efforts made by the staff in the SSC, but on the other, they do not want to admit they actually needed the SSCs, or even worse, that the SSC could not provide the 'help', so chose to distance themselves from the issues that the SSC presented, shielding themselves behind the mistaken belief that SSC could provide none-contextualised 'skills'. In this belief system, the academic tutor and coordinator of the SSC, in turn, is 'demoted' and becomes a *persona non grata,* a sort of humanoid, *partial academic*, not a *proper lecturer* but a *skills tutor*, a *minister without a portfolio*. As I write in 2010, I am still involved in a University and College Union challenge over what the institution's personnel department means by its use of the term 'skills' on the role description for the work in the SSC.

The resulting implications of the different perceptions of the issues involved in 'higher skills' writing and study skills, manifests in a distorted and confused discourse; which has serious consequences for academic staff who help develop students' learning in any way either by working in the centre and teaching or researching students' needs.

Even when evidence was provided to prove that students had complex, learning and writing needs, the managers of the researched institution, refused to accept the study's findings (Barkas, 2008). This was to have a long term, negative impact on the staff who worked in the SSC. A further irony is that while the students could accept the reality of the situation in SSCs, the personnel department, some academic staff and the managers, could not. The possible reason behind their denial or refusal to accept the reality of students' needs and the different viewpoints are therefore, explored by encapsulating the nature of the views within worlds, in the different universes, and of what is perceived as a *higher education*.

I will discuss the dimensions of each of these concepts in the next chapter where I will also revisit the nature of the language and discourse of skills. The following section, however, will now outline the background in terms of policy development that led to the belief that SSCs could be the answer to students' needs.

Background

The belief that more graduates in the workforce will increase the prosperity of nations has become a core educational policy over the past few decades, particularly in western democracies (Brown et al., 2008). In England, widening participation in universities has become the focus of the government's education policy since the 1963 Robbins Report, but it has gained significant momentum in the past 20 or so years through, in particular, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act*,* the Kennedy and Dearing Reports of 1997 and the 2003 White Paper, The Future of