



EDITORIAL

Resisting homogeneity in higher education: perspectives from praxis

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This Special Issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* (ISWP) features papers authored by participants from the National Writing Program for Equity and Widening Participation Practitioners convened by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle. In 2019 four two-day workshops were held in Newcastle, co-convened by the authors of this editorial. Important contributions were made by Professor Andrew Brown, Dr Anna Bennett, Dr Steven Threadgold, and Dr Jo Hanley who have generously offered their expertise and experience in ways that helped to make the workshop series a vibrant pedagogical space. In addition, each participant was allocated an academic mentor who is recognised as a leading scholar in the field. To these mentors we offer our deep ongoing gratitude, as it is often within this critical friendship that participants continue to find their voice given the ongoing sensitive development of “writer-centred relationships where the focus is the writer’s situation and needs” (Crocker & Trede, 2009, p. 231).

The authors of these works are equity practitioners from a diversity of Australian higher education contexts. They have laboured for over a year during intersecting national and global crises to develop contributions to the literature at the nexus of practice and research on equity and widening participation. Against a backdrop of bushfires, a global pandemic and ensuing economic shocks, the authors were supported to produce work that interrogates and extends thinking in relation to topics they identified to be important considerations for the field. In this editorial we provide a short overview of the programmatic foundation from which the Special Issue papers have developed, as a way of contextualising their contribution to the field of equity in higher education in Australia. We then briefly introduce the papers, identifying key questions they ask of us as readers, while working to draw out a common theme across the papers – namely, that of the problem of homogenisation – to identify the collective contribution this issue makes.

Firstly though, the consequences of thinking, conversing, writing and publishing in a context of disruption and crisis demand consideration, for it is arguably through *paying attention* to the current moment that we might better consider both the productive and problematic dimensions of our practices, values and commitments. As Biesta (2020) notes:

The interruption of the normal order literally makes us think – whether we want it or not – which, as such, is a good thing. In this regard, it is actually quite appropriate to refer to the situation as a crisis, because in its original meaning, crisis is not a state of chaos, but a critical moment or turning point that calls for consideration and judgement (in Greek: ‘krinein’). (p. 1)

This Special Issue is certainly published in tense times; an historical moment that reinforces the importance of asking questions of ourselves regarding the sorts of worlds we wish to inhabit. Gendered violence is escalating, manifesting in new and horrifying forms. Systemic racial injustices are foregrounded in news cycles and public actions, generating opportunities to reflect on new ways we might proceed and also reminders of and platforms for enduring racist commitments. A cold war between nuclear-capable ‘superpowers’ seems once again plausible. The existential threat of human-induced climate change as part of a broader environmental collapse becomes clearer by the day as impacts cascade across sectors and scales. It is within these inter-related conditions that COVID-19 is reshaping communities and economies, highlighting and accelerating existing social inequalities. Where is hope?

Spaces of active and critical consideration of the perspectives and judgements driving practices in higher education are worryingly rare, as our institutions have become increasingly riven by individuation and competition within neoliberal imaginaries (Connell, 2013) and shaped by a ‘new managerialism’ (Apple, 2014). This is the difficult terrain into which the writing program steps, in an effort to provide a pedagogy of hope; praxis-based spaces for collaboration, debate and dissemination from the perspective of those positioned as ‘practitioners’ in the field of equity and widening participation. In this regard, the papers that make up this volume tend towards *education(al) research*, with the distinction between ‘education research’ versus ‘educational research’ being that the former refers to “social science research about education to produce knowledge and understanding, and the latter geared also to improvement of education policy and practices” (Lingard, 2020, p. 166). The authors in this issue are asking us to pay attention to an aspect of policy and/or practice in the Australian context which they argue needs improvement, and to sit with the concerns raised while considering the implications for our own contexts and practices. It is here, in the paying of attention that we find the possibility of a critical hope (Bozalek, Leibowitz, Carolissen & Boler, 2014) that values change driven by social justice principles and which might just be possible in higher education through collective and critical action/reflection (praxis).

The ‘writing’ program

The National Writing Program for Equity and Widening Participation Practitioners (the writing program) commenced in Australia in 2017, having developed in initial partnership with a UK initiative (Burke, 2018; Bennett, Burke, Stevenson & Tooth, 2018). The Special Issue papers presented here emerged from activity facilitated throughout 2019 by CEEHE, as participants from across the nation gathered throughout the year at workshops in Newcastle. Conceptualised as a praxis-based framework and drawing pedagogically from the feminist and Freirean perspectives and commitments that guide CEEHE, the workshop and academic mentoring program structures are designed as a facilitative framework from which the participants construct a project around ideas and questions they have brought to the program. As has been identified previously (Burke, 2018; Bunn & Lumb, 2019), the pedagogical spaces curated are intentionally at once supportive and unsettling, from which writing does spring but from which many other ‘outcomes’ are identified by participants including new ways of working, contributions to institutional policy and strategy, application for promotion and advocacy for new initiatives.

The challenge of securing ‘time and space’ for critical pedagogical projects in increasingly unbundled, commodified and marketised systems of higher education is a theme that has been explored by the authors of this issue (Burke, Bennett, Bunn, Stevenson & Clegg, 2017; Bunn, Bennett & Burke, 2019). The writing program draws from critical pedagogical praxis to generate collective time and space for participants to engage with forms of critical reflexivity through

writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). It is commonly reported that the yearlong participation becomes, as Weiler (2020) describes in this Special Issue, an “opportunity for time and space to evaluate my own practice, perspectives, approaches and attitudes” (p. 71).

Recently, in a critically reflexive moment as part of a CEEHE workshop, one of us (Matt L) wrote about the importance of discomfort and of a generative pedagogical unsettling in any project of asking the relatively more privileged why the present looks as it does, if we are wanting to apprehend the ways in which our daily practices hold in place our inequitable social status quo. Naming privilege is not enough. We are always, as relatively privileged actors but a short, lazy and disrespectful step towards an ‘inclusion’ that, as Burke (2017) explains, coerces those seen as excluded to “conform to the conventions, expectations and values of hegemonic discourses and practices and to participate in a process of individual ‘transformation’ into normalized personhoods” (p. 433).

Reflecting on such dilemmas opened up spaces for reflexive writing processes about our relation to complex power dynamics. Matt L found himself writing about kayaking:

I was raised on the mid north coast of NSW by two primary school educators. Every Easter School break we would load tents and kayaks onto the roof racks of an old Volvo station wagon and drive up to the Boyd River just west of a town called Grafton. We would stay for almost a week with a few other families. When there had been a lot of recent rain, the river would be running fast and high. The adults would be excited. I remember feeling scared by the noise of the water crashing constantly over the rocks.

The strategy in kayaking is to accept you are in a large body of water, and to paddle in ways that mean you end up moving either faster or slower than the current, in an effort to regulate your progress. This means working hard to either charge through a white-water section (‘rapid’) with strong strokes, or to endlessly resist the flow by maintaining a sustained control with backwards strokes while still mostly facing forward. In both cases, the aim is to avoid being simply carried along. ‘Going with the flow’ is dangerous in that the river wants to constantly reproduce and embed a particular path. Often this dominant path leads to the deepest ‘stopper’ in that section (a treacherous form of rapid that drops over a ledge and then rolls back on itself over and over and can easily trap a kayak and the person inside), or sweeps in under the trees on the bank, or heads straight over the next waterfall.

Kayakers instead learn to paddle faster or slower than the stream, and to use moments called ‘eddies’ which are small, gently circulating sections of water off to the side of the river that are commonly present before and after rapids. These eddies are places of rest and recuperation, but also strategy and calculation, still close to the action, yet removed from the main flows. They are places from which the turbulence can be observed and discussed. Eddies are the foundations for planning routes through the next pitch or assessing how something might have been negotiated differently. (Lumb, 2020, p. 258)

The writing program is part of CEEHE’s advocacy for the ‘making of’ time and spaces to act/reflect critically on the ongoing construction of contemporary higher education; a set of contexts in which an ever-increasing hegemonic neoliberal ‘flow’ has surged across globalised social systems. To borrow from the kayaking analogy above, a way to conceptualise approaches to interrogating educational values and practices is to think about the difficulties (but also the

opportunities) to paddle faster or slower than the current and or find the eddies that might exist or be co-constructed. The writing program seems akin to an eddy for higher education practitioners to urgently ‘slow down’ and discuss and develop ideas emerging from their practice by engaging with critical social science. The program seeks to produce peer-support, co-learning and respectful debate whilst not shirking the responsibility to engage with important literature. The sense of restoration from this process of ‘patient praxis’ (Bunn & Lumb, 2019) that many writing program participants report is consistently surprising. At the end of each workshop, participants can be observed steeling themselves to re-enter their contexts of practice, with a renewed perspective of the fluid super systems they are re-entering, arguably differently equipped to navigate the perils and possibilities.

The papers

The problem of policy and practice constructing (often excluded) groups as homogenous is a common thread of analysis throughout the papers comprising this Special Issue. In different ways, the authors tease out aspects of this problematic, highlighting ways in which our policy and practice-making relies heavily on categorisations that work to obscure “the intricate ways that differences intersect in embodied formations of identity and subjectivity” (Burke, 2017, p. 434). The question of social justice in education has been the source of a complex and long standing debate to consider the difficulties of redistributing resources (including opportunities) without problematically classifying and categorising those to whom these resources are to be redistributed. Without the room in this editorial to unpack these concerns fully, we introduce briefly the framework CEEHE adopts in an attempt to navigate these complex concerns in the context of higher education; the multi-dimensional formation of social justice possibility offered by Nancy Fraser (1997). These dimensions include redistribution relating to the economic and material, recognition relating to the cultural and representation relating to the political. Fraser is interested in both the abstract and material dimensions that, when held together, can produce a nuanced ‘parity of participation’ in various contexts. This is not a crude numerical parity that Fraser refers to here. It is not simply about quotas or a counting form of accountability. Instead, the considerations here are about the complex interplay of elements that hold the possibility of ‘participatory parity’. Burke (2017) has explored how might students and teachers create spaces for the parity of participation across and among these three inter-related social justice domains and formations of difference in ways that acknowledge the lived and embodied politics of emotion and shame. Through this exploration Burke (2017) has aimed to “re/imagine difference not as a problem to be regulated for disciplinary processes of standardization and homogenization but as a critical resource to reflexively develop collective and ethical participation in pedagogical spaces” (p. 442).

Processes of assessment and evaluation, particularly those focusing on categorisation and measurement, are a central ongoing concern in relation to ‘producing’ equity and/or social justice in contexts of higher education. Key to these debates are questions about, within demonstrably structurally inequitable systems, on whose terms adjudications of the worth or value of something or someone are made (Burke & Lumb, 2018). In this Special Issue, **Kristen Allen** offers a nuanced study on ‘student success’, a topic of prominence in contemporary higher education. Via a study that juxtaposes the representations of success in policy with those reported by students, Allen finds that methods used to measure success can help to render invisible forms of success that students themselves value yet which often lie outside the dominant framing. Through interviews with students, and by conducting analysis from the position of an Enabling Education program convenor and teacher, Allen (2020) shows that ‘fixed’ measures of success can obscure perceptions and experiences that are important to students, finding they “are not a homogenous group whose success can be measured uniformly” (p. 2).

Exploring questions of access, equity, participation and rural, regional and remote students in this issue is **Wes Heberlein** with a paper looking at the influence university outreach programs have on rural youth. Critiquing the “binary notion of rural and urban divides”, Heberlein (2020, p. 22) finds in his investigation of outreach influence that factors, including rural community norms, family expectations and perceived ability, impact how young people envision their futures. Yet within these influences, higher education outreach programs aimed at rural communities can be crucial in providing the impetus to consider higher education study. Also taking up questions of difference and homogeneity in Australian higher education in this issue is **Chris Ronan** in an examination of what he describes as repeated attempts to categorise and classify just what ‘rural, regional and remote’ students are. In his paper, he details key policy reports and reforms over the widening participation era that have led to an homogenous definition that does not do justice to student context: “Each non-urban community has a diverse interplay of culture, geography and economic factors that make them distinctly unique, yet public policy has largely historically categorised them as having equal needs” (Ronan, 2020, pp. 37-38). Analysing the discourses upon which rural, regional and remote policy has been constructed in Australia, Ronan makes a case that ‘place-based’ education, in concert with an homogeneous framing of students from Rural, Regional and Remote backgrounds in higher education policy, has perpetuated the mobility paradigm for students leaving school in Australia, positioning those who ‘stayed’ as problematic.

Edwina Newham writes alongside her role as an AccessAbility Advisor in higher education to consider the often troubling way students with a disability are positioned. Newham (2020) calls out the problem: “Assuming ‘Students with a Disability’ are a homogenous equity group, neatly categorised and measurable, is inherently problematic” (p. 49). Framing her scoping study is a telling title that challenges us to think ‘beyond reasonable adjustments’. The study draws together difficult questions of disclosure, stigma, reporting and the ‘hidden’ dimensions of the field. Newham brings attention to the important dilemmas that reside within efforts to resolve ‘problems’ when a deficit lens facilitates the higher education imaginary.

Also identifying the challenge of escaping a deficit framing of equity in this issue is a reflexive contribution by **Tanya Weiler** who, borrowing from auto-ethnographic approaches, details a ‘Hero’s Journey’ as educator through the difficult territory of offering orientation initiatives for students commencing enabling programs. Presented with admirable honesty, Weiler’s contribution to this Special Issue demonstrates a responsibility to students in higher education that as educators we must remain equally committed to continual learning. Using ‘facepalm’ moments and Campbell’s (1949) Hero’s Journey to structure the paper, Weiler challenges us to remember the endless presence of our assumptions and prejudices as we go about reconstructing higher education in our daily practices.

The papers explore a range of contexts and dilemmas but together shed light on the symbolic violence that emerges from structures of homogenisation. In the spirit of the writing program, we extend an invitation to readers of this Special Issue to engage in critical consideration with us about processes of building greater sensitivity to the politics of difference and generating contextualised understanding of how difference plays out in the lived, embodied experiences of students.

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