Student – Public – Sociologist

On dialogue with our first public, and in widening access to higher education.

<1>Introduction

By some measurements, I should not be in a position where I can contribute a chapter to an academic text. I entered university as a mature, working class, first generation student from a rural background, with less than impressive school attainment and a menial employment history. Here, as an early career lecturer experiencing culture shock, imposter syndrome and struggling with my mental health at time of writing, I reflect on the impact of dialogue on the Scottish widening access agenda and of students as arguably our first and most important public.

If Burawoy's address acts as a foundation of discussion here then let us consider his thesis on 'The Multiplicity of Public Sociologies' – where perhaps lost among assertions of traditional and organic public sociology, Burawoy (2005: 9) describes students as 'carriers of a rich lived experience' and of 'ambassadors of sociology'. Back (2016: 46) is more straightforward, identifying students as 'our first public and often our most important audience and some of them are also our future colleagues'. Rather than simply a homogeneous mass, students experience their degree careers in the public sphere as a collective of diverse backgrounds and private issues.

The UK widening access agenda seeks to move beyond the traditional white middle class student population, and the Scottish approach has been to reduce financial and attainment barriers to entering higher education (HE), to instil a greater sense of meritocracy and social equality in society (Iannelli 2011; Tight 2012; Lasselle 2016; Rainford 2016; Sosu et al. 2016). Friedman (2016), Reay (2017) and others can evidence and attest to the fact however, that this simplistic and short sighted numbers management has thus far served only to perpetuate class and minority inequality, and further stratify HE. Decision makers have ignored 'the complexities of the [social] mobility experience' (Friedman 2016: 145) and significance of forms of capital available – or not – to students from different backgrounds. At times the politicised goals of reducing inequality and increasing social mobility have become conflated with achieving targets and success in league tables (Ianelli 2011; Gallacher 2014; Weedon 2016).

Defining widening access/widening participation (WP) and the groups to which it refers in Scotland varies across governmental policy (Scot Gov 2016), sectoral direction (HEA 2013) and academic literature. Typically, though, it includes examples of Fraser's (1990) subaltern counter publics - 'women, lower socio-economic groups, mature adults, and ethnic minorities' (Tight 2012: 211), disabled people, care leavers and those who are the first in their family to enter HE (Roberts 2011; Meharg et al. 2017). As the Scottish Government pursues the broadening of the widening access agenda (Weedon 2016), it requires consideration in terms of how the habitus of future colleagues from so called non traditional backgrounds are impacted upon by their experience of HE.

Still seen and felt by most to be a middle class (or elite) environment, in which access to and aptitude in forms of capital is to an extent pre-determined, the mere admission to university does not solve social inequalities (Ianelli 2011; Lasselle 2016; Reay 2017). If we can agree that one of the inherent tasks of the public sociologist is to critique and counter this, then where better to begin than in the lecture, the seminar, the workshop, the supervisory meeting?

This chapter positions WP activities and engaging so called non traditional students in meaningful dialogue as public sociology practice, exploring and addressing the exclusion of WP groups from the dominant public sphere via the field of education. I draw upon some of my own experience as a student from a working class, rural background and transitioning into being employed as a lecturer with responsibility for WP at Queen Margaret University (QMU).

<1>Student

Increasingly, research conceptualises the student sense of belonging and their experience of transitioning into, through and out of HE – the experience of social mobility, in part – in Bourdieusian terms of habitus and capital (Reay et al. 2009; Lehmann 2013; Alexander 2016; Friedman 2016; Abrahams 2017). Although certainly adaptable, the habitus (its resilience and the extent of its malleability) is largely the result of parent culture and early socialisation (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). Students entering the university environment already equipped with substantial reserves of social and cultural capital to draw upon will be in a stronger position to accumulate further and more broadly than those students whose socio economic and/or cultural backgrounds are not as typically accommodating (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Students are typically expected to move away from home to transition into an independent student identity which alligns with their chosen institution. This ritualised process of financial and geographical mobility inherently assumes the youth, lack of responsibility, monetary security and ease of travel that working class rural applicants do not necessarily have (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Alexander 2016; Lasselle 2016). Applicants from the Scottish islands are immediately disadvantaged by geography: the physical distance required to travel to a mainland HEI, the time and cost involved; as well as the distance from support networks, cultural belonging and well being associated with home (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Alexander 2016; Lasselle 2016).

Linguistics create further barriers. To the lament of my grandmother, I have spent years curbing my distinctive Shetland accent and dialect in order to be understood in mainland (particularly Central) Scotland and better fit in. I am not alone. It is commonplace for students transitioning into HE to develop a chameleon-like approach to their new environment and what they perceive to be the right ways to sound and behave in order to be successful (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Addison and Mountford 2015). Accents and ways of talking are burdened by associations with class, intelligence and value and therefore of insider/outsider status in certain contexts. HE staff and students have been commonly found altering their own speech to align with a form of Standard English and its perceived middle class legitimacy and cultural connotations (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Addison and Mountford 2015; Donnelly 2018; Donnelly et al. 2019).

This is known in the Shetland tongue as "knappin'", where dialect speakers switch to Standard English for a variety of reasons and in specific situations, most commonly when speaking to persons unfamiliar with Shetland dialect (Karam 2017). Knappin' perpetuates an insider/outsider dichotomy and in some circumstances delegitimises the capital and experience of Shetlanders in favour of dominant structural discourse.

"They [mainlanders]'ll just have to learn", my grandmother said, and of course she was right. If the institution is to reflect society, then the institution is to be a place where the student population is a plurality of diverse, intersecting publics – subaltern, counter, or otherwise – in which some dominant forms of capital are abandoned where they serve no constructive purpose. Rather than filtering the student public, as it has historically done, it must explore and appreciate the multiplicity of the student public in discourse and collaboration (Fraser 1990; Nakano Glenn 2007). Opportunities for staff and students to present research, take part in

knowledge exchange, debate, etc., in their native dialect would for example create academic environments where publics could palpably enter and be included in HEIs.

<1>Public

For a brief passage in Burawoy's (2005) eleven theses, he walks through the centre of a Venn diagram of practicality, pastoral work and opportunism. Readily available, in some institutions growing, and occasionally even an avid audience – the student public is oftentimes overlooked where academics view lecturing as a chore rather than a privilege (Back 2016). Undertaking an undergraduate degree is not merely a process of learning for the student, of the input of knowledge and intellectual expansion as new ideas are grappled with – but a transitional life experience in every sense of the word (Light et al. 2009; Lehmann 2013; Reay 2017). The skills and conceptualisations that sociology students acquire should better equip them to navigate the complexities of social and organisational control they encounter outside of the HEI (Nyden et al. 2012), and so it is the responsibility of educators to appreciate the power and influence they wield.

'Education', Burawoy (2005: 9) says, 'becomes a series of dialogues on the terrain of sociology that we foster…'

<2>…a dialogue between ourselves and students…

Whether taking direction from Simmel or Burawoy (2005), Gouldner or Hartmann (2017), or whoever else inspires, the public sociologist within the HEI has the opportunity to use the relative freedom they have as educator. Bringing professional debates, sector challenges, personal concerns and above all, honesty, into class discussion as part of a reflexive process of demystifying HE and the discipline can serve as an engaging and self-affirming process for student and lecturer alike (Dallyn et al. 2015; Kane 2016). Kane (2016), for example, has been contributing to this process for some time in her teaching – bringing public sociology from the staffroom to the classroom as an embedded feature of a module – exploring together the realities of how HE reaches and collaborates with communities, how sociology as a profession is structured and operates, and the inequalities found within academia itself.

Improving dialogue between academics/lecturers and first public, balancing the power dynamic and demystifying HE can also begin to be achieved via institutionally embedded WP initiatives as well as simple, individual changes to teaching (Sosu et al. 2016; Thomas et al.

2017; Breeze et al. 2018). Some students find lecturers stand-offish and are put-off asking for help due to difficulties in establishing trusting enough relationships with them (HEA 2013; Meharg et al., 2017). Recently, Public Sociology Masters students at QMU highlighted the difficulty they had had transitioning into HE and acclimatising to not just the academic terminology, but also some of the professional language and formality found at an institutional level. Long before Burawoy (2005) and since (Besbris and Khan 2017; Healy 2017), professional and critical sociology has been criticised for its introspection, over theorising and impracticality. In a small, post-92 university like QMU – the kind of institution where the larger share of so called non traditional students are enrolled (Ianelli 2011; Gallacher 2014) – dialogue with students ought to be in terms and contexts that they can understand and engage with. That is by no means to suggest that dumbing down is required, but rather by having a greater awareness of the demographics of the lecture hall and appreciation of the publics that make it, academics and others may find common ground and engage in a more reciprocal form of teaching which focuses more on empirical description as Besbris and Khan (2017) suggest. .

The lessons from feminism that Fairbairn (2019) discusses as aiding public sociology bridge the gap between university and community, of reflexivity, praxis and interdisciplinarity, are at their core further evidence of the need to engage in dialogue that is accessible and honest. I attempt to conduct lectures, facilitate seminars, write papers and book chapters in a tone that is as accessible to all as possible, while recognising that an appropriate amount of academic challenge and dissemination is still necessary. I have been in discussion elsewhere (Christie and Johnson 2017; Breeze et al. 2018) about the academic and personal labour one must invest, however, in this occasionally more informal and fluid pedagogical approach.

One more institutionally structured WP approach to engaging our first public, challenging perceptions and power dynamics between lecturers and students has been developed with colleagues (Breeze et al. 2018). We undertook a longitudinal induction project which assessed the main aptitudes and anxieties of students in their first week at university, in order to better accommodate them as much as practically possible in the semester ahead. Establishing informal face to face contact and talking honestly about expectations in a university degree can serve as a stepping-stone to students at risk feeling comfortable in approaching individual staff – whether in open drop-in sessions, skills workshops, by email or at the end of lectures – and working to support, signpost appropriate services and find solutions to their issues (HEA 2013; Meharg et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2017; Breeze et al. 2018).

<2>…between students and their own experiences, among students themselves…

Transitions into, through and out of HE can be fraught with anxieties, expectations, uncertainties, information overload and loneliness (Christie et al. 2013; HEA 2013; Christie and Johnson 2017). Facilitating student peer interaction is of course part of the everyday work of lecturers, but important too is that students have discursive spaces of their own, whether created by or provided for them. Institutions such as QMU – which may be described as less prestigious, or in the terminology of Boliver et al. (2018), less likely to be 'nationally selective' universities and certainly not 'globally competitive' – are doing the heavy lifting in WP as 'social groups with historically low participation rates are least well represented in the more prestigious universities' (O'Sullivan et al. 2019: 2). WP groups such as direct entrants via college articulation, mature students, lone parents, disabled people, care leavers, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, etc., form the multiplicity of subaltern publics which contest the historically dominant homogeny of middle class and elite higher education (Fraser 1990; Nakano Glenn 2007; Reay 2017).

Certain HEIs thus become opportunities for the experiences, identities and knowledge of publics to be shared with one another, heard perhaps for the first time and challenged by each other. As Fraser (1990) expands, by accommodating a diverse variety of competing subaltern counter publics, a small post 92 university such as QMU may better promote and progress participative equality.

Small steps may be taken in learning and teaching to lay foundations. Peer assisted learning support (PALS) schemes train students to facilitate informal additional revision and review classes, where lecturers have no input or presence (Packham and Miller 2000; Colvin and Ashman 2010). In some sense professionalising the common base form study group, PALS schemes leave students free to explore their own pedagogies while legitimising and expanding the aptitudes and capital brought into the institution from their own publics.

This does, however, highlight the impact of structural constraints on individual agency and success. PALS schemes – such as that recently begun with our own sociology programmes at QMU – rely on availability and attendance. Students with jobs and/or children and/or restrictive disabilities and health concerns and/or live outside of urban areas with reliable (and affordable) transport infrastructure are highly unlikely to engage with additional voluntary class time. This is especially true of commuter institutions such as QMU and it remains to be seen how successful PALS will be for student peer engagement in the long term.

<2>…and finally a dialogue of students with publics beyond the university

Engaging our first public with public sociology literature, the realities of HE and academia, and with the lived experiences and personal troubles of their peers may initially seem like a labour of Hercules in itself, ‘but there is a more difficult task of building a dialogue with the publics outside the universities’ (Scott 2005: 408).

It stands to reason then, to begin taking steps towards the apprenticeship of students as public sociologists as early as possible. Part of the challenge of public sociology is in communicating it with citizens outside of academia, thus if we can successfully engage our students then they are better equipped and positioned to return to their own parent cultures and publics to begin the conversation between communities and public sociologists (Kalleberg 2005; Hartman 2017; Wingfield 2017). How exactly this takes shape in practice will be at the discretion of those involved, but we may return to Kane (2016) for an example. Having engaged her students in debates around public sociology, they then had opportunities to work with local publics through community-based research projects – during which time they were tasked with collaborating on beneficial issue-based outcomes.

A similar module is run at QMU, which I have had the pleasure of contributing teaching to. Engaged Sociology involves the close reading of Burawoy’s (2005) address and the critique that followed, as well as exploring the contributions of Freire, Gramsci, Elias, Bourdieu and Wacquant and more. Alongside these classroom discussions students are offered the chance of various local voluntary opportunities, which they then write reflections on as part of their assessment. I have rather taken the opening line of the module handbook for Engaged Sociology literally, as it states: ‘This module marks a key moment in your apprenticeship as a Public Sociologist’.

Quaye and Harper (2015) rightly state, though, that we cannot simply expect students to take full responsibility in engaging themselves in their education and activities such as those outlined above. It is up to academics to ‘foster the conditions that enable diverse populations of students to be engaged’ (Quaye and Harper 2015: 5); which for our first public requires lecturing teams and accompanying degree programmes that are honestly and explicitly dedicated to the ethos of public sociology, and institutions that focus on customised practices to ensure success rather than league tables (Etzioni 2005; Quaye and Harper 2015; Reay 2017).

<1>Sociologist

Nyden et al. (2012) believe that the key to ensuring successful graduates lies in the encouragement and resourcing of academics with proven track records of public sociology scholarship and engagement with learning and teaching. What that looks like is debateable, however, as the neoliberal university will likely measure it by impact and output, Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK, and table achievements; while individual public sociologists – indeed academics of any discipline – may quite rightly take a more holistic, person centred view. It matters because increasingly the face of the current and future generation of academic staff is one of anxiety, imposter, precarity and detrimental fetishization of the doctorate (Logan et al. 2014; Dallyn et al. 2015; Breeze 2018; Loveday 2018).

I am in my thirties, I do not have a doctorate and up until a few years ago had never had a job that allowed for sitting down for extended periods of time. The meetings, policies and bureaucracy (a word I still cannot spell correctly on first attempt) of working in a HEI baffle and frustrate me; yet I contribute to it in my efforts to level the playing field for all students – regardless of background, though perhaps admittedly with some bias towards those similar to myself – and further cement my experience and credentials as a member of staff worth keeping under contract.

Just as the casually employed academic staff of Loveday's (2018) research, I have pressured myself into trying to become the kind of lecturer that gets noticed by management, that students seek out for support, who works over and above their contracted parameters, whose mental health has been negatively affected as a result, and perpetually does not feel they belong to their institution and profession in any case. The short-sighted approach of the neoliberal university (and target driven political sphere) is harmful to the staff it so heavily relies upon – staff who function as a result of institutionalised anxiety, as well as in spite of it (Loveday 2018). Just as it is harmful to the students it claims to open its doors to, while determining which particular doors are available.

My employment has, however, afforded me the opportunity to be part of tangible and long term institutional change in contributing to the development of QMU's contextualised admissions (CA) policy. CA is an increasingly popular tool in opening doors to university, where admissions decisions are taken on comparable merit to standard admissions, with an appreciation of an individual's attainment in relation to their school, social background and

personal status (for example, having experience in a care background) (Boliver et al. 2018; O'Sullivan et al. 2019). The removal of unconsciously biased 'one size fits all' minimum entry requirements – which favoured applicants with greater amounts of capital – aims to better accommodate students based on their drive and potential (Rainford 2016; Sosu et al. 2016; Weedon 2016; Boliver et al. 2018). In the case of QMU, our research into WP and review of internal data has had the added benefit of evidencing the flaws in the dominant approach to university admissions; in many cases applicants with lower attainment or that had taken non traditional entry routes were just as, if not more, likely to successfully complete their degree as their paradigm fitting peers.

<1>Conclusion

Sociology as a discipline is 'in constant need of revitalization' (Hartmann 2017: 14) in order to keep pace with society itself. Making a dedicated effort to engaging the current and potential next generation of academics in public sociology scholarship means making a parallel dedication to rethinking our degree programmes, pedagogies and embedding WP approaches for all students (Nyden et al. 2012). Dialogues, competing discourses both in and outside of the university walls are crucial to not just the revitalization of public sociology as our discipline but also to the parity of educational participation as our responsibility.

As Nakano Glenn (2007) foresaw, my background informs my sense of responsibility, or accountability, to other students from subaltern publics. Surely then, it is as a public sociologist that I may begin to highlight and address the inequalities in HE, at least at a local level – at a public level? Perhaps I can still identify myself as part of the working-class rural public I was when I was a student? By embracing the identity of cultural outsider with a conflicted (chameleon) habitus crossing a divide, I can work towards becoming something in the vein of a Simmel-esque Stranger who is in the university, but not *of the institution* (Dallyn et al. 2015). An academic who prioritises their lecturing, tutoring and student pastoral support, with a temperament that does not conform to the professionalism of the sector and chooses to write in an accessible way.

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