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Book Review - The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation

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Abstract

When we first conceived of the idea of the Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion Forum - the word critical was at the forefront in our minds. We wanted to create an opportunity to critically reflect on the ways in which the most recent social inclusion agenda might be understood and acted upon while being attentive to the ways in which "doing" social inclusion might inadvertently reproduce or manifest other forms of social exclusion. We also wanted to discuss what doing social inclusion might mean for our work as academic language and learning educators, as discipline lecturers, as policy makers and policy enactors, and most importantly, for our students.

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BOOK REVIEW

The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation

Penny Jane Burke, 2012

Routledge, Milton Park & New York

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When we first conceived of the idea of the *Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion Forum* – the word critical was at the forefront in our minds. We wanted to create an opportunity to critically reflect on the ways in which the most recent social inclusion agenda might be understood and acted upon while being attentive to the ways in which “doing” social inclusion might inadvertently reproduce or manifest other forms of social exclusion. We also wanted to discuss what doing social inclusion might mean for our work as academic language and learning educators, as discipline lecturers, as policy makers and policy enactors, and most importantly, for our students.

Penny Jane Burke’s book, *The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation* considers these things and more, and pays particular attention to notions of difference and diversity in order to consider why it is that despite years of attention to social inclusion, inequality in terms of the participation and success of certain groups in higher education persists. Burke’s book is particularly attentive to the British context. She draws on an impressive array of theory including feminist post-structuralism, critical pedagogy, and political sociology; national and institutional policy documents; data from her own research projects; interviews with social inclusion practitioners and with students; and, her own theorised accounts of being a nontraditional student in higher education. She draws these diverse sources together to argue that the politics of recognition and misrecognition, and an understanding of wider social inequalities are important components of understanding how social exclusion/inclusion operates and indeed persists.

The first section of her book is largely devoted to plotting the discourses surrounding widening participation (WP) and reconceptualising WP and its subjects. In this section, Burke makes a case that access and participation in higher education needs to be understood not in terms of raising individual aspirations but “in relation to collective and personal histories of under- and misrepresentation, as well as the ways some subjects (are made to) feel different and ‘unworthy’ of higher education access and participation”(p. 62). In making this argument, Burke draws from poststructuralist theorisations of identity or subject formation understood as an ongoing process tied to Foucauldian understandings of discourse and power. Identity, or subject formation is linked to recognition and misrecognition, that is, the processes by which the subject is recognised or not (as, for example, “talented”, “disadvantaged”, “in need of remediation” and so on ...) rather than as an already formed, fixed and coherent entity. Processes of recognition take place in social contexts where power relations play out. As such, who and what counts as “talented”, “disadvantaged” and so on, is closely bound to institutional practices and socially sanctioned notions of these labels.

One of the most powerful aspects of this first section of her book is Burke’s re-thinking of the subjects of WP. The politics of misrepresentation that she outlines and the ways in which this misrepresentation of certain groups might reinforce deficit discourses has important

ramifications for how we, as academic language and learning educators, are both positioned and position our students. This section of her book, for example, provokes us to consider the ways in which the language that is used to describe our work and our students throws us into therapeutic, redemptionist or other discourses that re-instate students as deficient, in need of rescue – as non-normative in some way. Are there ways of thinking, naming and doing academic language and learning work that refuse, rework or step around these effects of language and practice?

The second section of Burke's book deals with methodologies for researching and developing practices for widening participation, which she argues are often underdeveloped. She makes the case that epistemological frameworks shape research design: from the sorts of research questions that are asked, to the types of analyses and interpretations that are made, as well as the ways in which ethical issues and issues of identity or subjectivity are, or are not addressed. She also sets out to provide a set of tools that form part of a critical and reflexive methodology. The second chapter of this section provides some further description of the ways in which these tools have been employed in various research projects about widening participation.

While I cannot take issue with the epistemological, ontological or ethical stances that she adopts in this section, I must admit I was a little disappointed by the "tools" that I found in this section. Perhaps I was wanting the "silver bullet" methodology, but none really surfaced. What this section did do, however, was to highlight a glaring omission in the papers and presentations that made up the *Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion Forum* – where were the students? While some of the presenters did provide stories of their own, or their students' negotiations of higher education as non-traditional students, most of the time we were talking *about* students, hearing *about* students – but not, during the Forum, talking *with* them. A salutary lesson in the critical reflexivity that Burke advocates as part of her methodological toolkit!

The third section of Burke's book is enticingly titled, "Widening participation strategies and practices". In the first two chapters that make up this section, Burke challenges what she calls the discourses of raising aspirations and fair access. These discourses, Burke argues, lead to strategies that target those who are "recognized" as having the potential but lacking the aspiration to engage in higher education.

Raising aspirations is, Burke argues, a simplistic notion "embedded in problematic deficit and individualistic discourses" (p. 118) that do not attend to underlying operations of power and inequality embedded in complex social relations and contexts. In addition, she argues, this notion constructs further inequality by recognising some individuals and groups as lacking and inferior when compared with the "included" citizens who are seen as having the 'right' kinds of values, skills and aspirations" (p. 118). On the basis of this analysis, she asserts that policy "must take into account the discursive nature of aspiration-making" (p. 119).

Burke's critique of the notion of fair access is that it is premised on the idea of transparent criteria and regulations that are employed to make "fair" decisions about which candidates meet these criteria for higher education. Burke argues that this premise positions the notion of ability as inherent, fixed and individualised rather than socially constructed and connected with issues of class and gender. Further, recognition of those who "merit" higher education admission is, Burke argues, closely tied to the values and perspectives of those who make decisions about who will gain access.

The third concept of WP that Burke critiques in this section of her book is raising barriers. Research in this area has identified a number of barriers to WP such as cost and time and has given rise to strategies such as the establishment of flexible learning environments. But Burke argues that barriers are often less tangible, deeper and more institutionally entrenched than those identified and include, for example, access to privileged epistemological perspectives. Indeed, it is when Burke moves in to the section on "Thinking beyond barriers" that things get "close to the bone". Here she argues that WP students who make it into higher education "tend to be

conceptualized in terms of the need for remedial provision, such as academic language support or additional study skills classes ... usually provided outside their programme of study” (p. 143). This approach not only reinforces the notion of individual student deficit but also, she argues, tends to involve the teaching of writing as a set of skills and an understanding of the written text as “separate from ontology and epistemology” (p. 144).

Leaving aside the “ologies” for a moment, these pages (pp. 143-152) are highly pertinent to the work of academic language and learning educators. It is here that Burke advocates for an understanding of writing and literacy practices as social practice, as intimately bound up with the making of disciplinary knowledge, as implicated in issues of subjectivity, and as central to pedagogies of WP. Going further, however, she subjects the use of models of good written texts to scrutiny, and describes this as a hegemonic approach. I find myself unwilling to agree that the use of model texts sit outside a literacy-as-social-practice perspective. Indeed, such texts can be and should be used to do the sorts of text deconstruction that Burke then advocates – questioning the ways in which the writer positions him- or herself, the use of other writers and so on – and for the same reasons that she provides; to be able to do the sort of “complex decoding of tacit understandings and conventions” (p. 149) that sustain academic writing as “a gate keeping mechanism” (p. 149).

In the final chapter of this section, Burke provides accounts of WP professionals and practices, many of which are also marginalised within their respective institutions. Burke calls instead for an approach to WP which she argues is transformative – an “embedded approach” (p. 173) which draws together all levels of the institution including senior managers, and brings together theory and practice to challenge deep-seated inequalities and misrecognitions. The fourth and final section of her book expands on this vision and, as she says, offers students, practitioners, policy makers and academics possibilities for creating a more inclusive higher education space.

The book is set out so that a reader can dip into and out of any chapter in any sequence and still get at the main argument. I really wanted to like this book – I like its politics – but at times I found it skating over too many ideas and I wanted more depth. This said, it is still a very worthwhile book for the project of rethinking the policies, practices and language of social inclusion in ways that chip away at often inadvertently exclusionary ways of doing pedagogy and policy. It is also a book that recognises the tensions, contradictions and unfinished business of doing this sort of work.

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