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Every word starts with 'dis': the impact of class on choice, application and admissions to prestigious higher education art and design courses

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ABSTRACT

The UK government's commitment to increasing the number of working class students in higher education places little emphasis on who goes to which university to study what subject. It thus is failing to acknowledge the advantages which elitist universities bestow on their predominantly middle class graduates. This article looks at how issues of class impact on university choice, application and admission, with particular emphasis on art and design higher education. In particular, it examines the part that habitus and cultural capital play in how applicants choose universities, make applications and navigate an admissions process that includes producing an art and design portfolio and attending an interview. It argues that class is the main determinant of who studies on prestigious art and design courses and compares the admissions practices used by secondary schools to maintain their position in league tables as well as higher education admissions. This article challenges the acceptability of the 'dis' language used in discourses of widening participation.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the government's effort to increase the diversity of the student cohort, higher education (HE) is still dominated by students from privileged backgrounds (HEFCE benchmarks, 2004). Furthermore, students from working class backgrounds, and particularly those from certain minority ethnic groups, attending higher education are concentrated in 'new' rather than prestigious 'old' universities ensuring "the continued reproduction of racialised and classed inequalities" (Reay et al., 1997, p. 872). This is cause for concern, given the considerable advantages that well renowned universities confer upon their graduates in terms of "salary, job security and power to influence society" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 6).

This article discusses the possible reasons why working class students are not well represented in prestigious universities. It focuses on a small scale study conducted in early 2003 at a selecting institution: the University School of Art and Design (USAD). My reasons for re-visiting my 2003 study are directly related to the benefits of undertaking the Widening Educational Participation: Policy and Practice module (WPPP), at the Institute of Education. The module has given me a theoretical framework within which to situate my study, hopefully enabling me to use the authoritative voices of the academy to powerfully amplify those of both prospective and actual students from working class backgrounds. I have always believed that entry to higher education is not just an individual, but also a

social and political issue. The WPPP course has given me the theoretical knowledge to support this view.

The decision to return to my study is also influenced by my reflexivity as a second generation Irish working class woman, particularly because I have recently come to appreciate that "all research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography" (Reay, 1998 cited in Burke, 2002, p. 5). At the risk of doing a class striptease (Lewis, 1992 cited in Morley, 1997), my own social background could be termed 'underclass', in that I grew up living with my immigrant lone parent mother and two siblings. At one point we lived, very happily, in a trailer. I sometimes, ironically, describe myself as 'trailer trash.' In the academy, I frequently find myself in situations where I am challenging the language used, and assumptions made about 'people like me' (Bourdieu, 1984). I am also motivated by my professional practice of working with young people. A Black young woman to whom I tried to explain 'widening participation' said to me *Yeah every word you lot use starts with 'dis'*. She meant terms such as 'disadvantaged,' 'disaffected,' and disengaged'. To 'diss' someone in youth, and particularly Black youth, culture, is to disrespect them. Her comment seemed to very aptly describe the disrespect with which so much of the academy treats working class students who are 'othered' and positioned as inferior to 'standard' middle class students (Burke, 2002), unless they have 'special talent' (ibid). This article sets out to challenge the deficit 'dis' model of working class students and to examine the structural barriers that prevent them from accessing the art and design academy.

My study concentrates on issues of choice, application and admission to higher education. Whilst recognising the central position of pedagogical practices to discourses of widening participation (Burke, 2002), as neither a teacher nor an art and design graduate, I feel unqualified to write about them and, therefore, have concentrated on pre-entry factors related to my professional position as a guidance practitioner working in a widening participation context. There is, however, an undoubted interdependence between issues of choice and admission and pedagogy (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

The study focuses on the views and experiences of two groups of young people: thirty Year 10, 11 and 12 school students participating in the university's widening participation activities, and eleven USAD first year undergraduates who at the time of the study had just started the second term of their course. Participants in the study were exclusively working class: the school students were all from areas, and schools, with low HE participation rates and the undergraduates were all recipients of opportunities bursaries (now HE Bursaries), which meant that they were from low income families with no history of HE participation. The school students were all interviewed in year groups and the undergraduates in one group; five of them were also interviewed individually. Additionally, I interviewed careers advisers and art teachers from areas of London with low HE progression rates, and a sample of USAD university staff involved in some capacity in either student recruitment or advice and guidance.

The group and individual interviews I conducted were framed around a series of questions. I wanted to discover what the school students thought of USAD's WP projects, whether

they were considering studying art and design and, if so, if they would apply to USAD. I was also interested in any general plans for the future they might have and who, if anyone, they asked for advice and support. With the undergraduates I was looking at similar themes, taking a retrospective view of their recent experience of choosing and applying to USAD. I wanted to see why they had chosen to study art and design, what had made them choose USAD, what, if any, advice and guidance they had received and what the admissions process had been like for them. The structure of this article follows the process of applications and admissions looking at choice, applications and admissions in chronological order. It also includes observations made from an applications advice project with which I was involved this year (McManus et al., 2005), and their relevance to higher education art and design admissions in HE generally.

CHOICE

In spite of the popularity of the University's widening participation projects, the majority of the school students said that they would not apply to USAD because they had heard "from everybody", including their teachers and the university's own staff working on WP projects, about the fierce competition for places and the high academic standards expected of students. Indeed, the school students believed that it was a waste of time applying, and that the academic standards were beyond them.

It's a great place but you can't get in. (Year 12 school student)
I wouldn't go there, the work's too hard. (Year 10 school student)

Worryingly, the more contact the school students had with university staff the less likely they were to consider studying at the university. This was partly due to USAD staff working on the project, adopting protectionist strategies by telling participants of the competition for places so they could help them avoid the disappointment of a failed application. This practice confirmed the school students' belief that USAD was not for 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1984). Burke (2002) highlights the dangers of atheoretical widening participation activities and projects that reinforce, rather than challenge, class inequalities.

The undergraduate students confirmed the experiences of the school students and complained that their own school and FE teachers had discouraged them from applying to USAD because they were 'setting their sights too high'. One student put it that: *It's hard to be confident when everyone keeps telling you that you are not good enough.*

Careers advisers and teachers interviewed were very open about their reluctance to suggest that any but the most 'talented' young people apply to the university. One head of art at an FE college said that they deliberately steered their students away from USAD in the belief that they would find the place 'too overwhelming', recommending instead less prestigious places of study. Careers Advisers believed that the University's strategy of marketing itself as a prestigious and internationally renowned university discouraged working class young

people from applying, making them opt instead for less 'prestigious' universities where they felt they were more likely to be accepted and to fit in.

Reay et al. (2005, p. 5), in their recent study of university choice, found that issues of class were the main predictor of 'who goes where and does what' in higher education. For middle class students, Reay at al argue, the initial choice of whether to apply to university at all is a non-choice. It is a natural part of the middle class life trajectory, a stage in a seamless journey. In the old universities they populate they are a 'fish-in-water' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 32) and applying to such establishments is natural for them, it's what 'people like them' do. For the working classes, however, things are very different. Both middle class and working class students' choices are influenced by what 'people like us' do. Reay et al. (2005) use Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field as a conceptual framework for interpreting HE applicants' decision making processes. Habitus is summed up as 'the product of social conditionings and thus of history' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 116 cited in Reay et al.) and as 'the practical mastery that people have of their own situations' (Robbins, 1991, p. 1).

Cultural capital, generated by habitus, is summed up by Reay et al. (1997, p. 82) as "subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language". It has three main variants (Reay et al., ibid):
o   its socialised embodiment (the result of pedagogical action),
o   its institutionalised state exemplified by educational qualifications, and
o   its objectified state in books, artefacts, paintings and so on.
Bourdieu emphasised the affective subjective aspects of cultural capital: "confidence, certainty and a sense of entitlement" (Reay et al., 1997, p. 21). Other forms of capital identified by Bourdieu include social, material and symbolic capital, all of which, like cultural capital, are highly classed.

Field can be understood as a particular social setting, both actual and abstract (Silva, 2004; cited in Reay et al., 2005), and as what gives habitus its dynamic quality. It is within field that habitus becomes practice. When habitus confronts an unfamiliar field the experience can be transformative, but more often produces feelings of "discomfort, ambivalence and uncertainty" (Reay et al., 2005, p. 28).

The impact of both habitus and cultural capital can be seen at play in the feelings and intentions of the school students interviewed for my study. By participating in the university's widening participation projects, they find themselves in the unfamiliar field of an elitist university and have neither the habitus nor the 'right' cultural capital, socialised or affective, to feel that it is a place for 'people like them'. Although the school students often lived within close physical proximity of USAD (some of them a few streets away from a main site) their psychological and emotional distance from the university (Reay et al., 1997) led them to exclude themselves from a place from which they are excluded (Bourdieu, 1984). Interestingly, when the school students were asked what might change their mind about applying to USAD, they suggested meeting students who were 'people like us'. The undergraduate interviewees talked about issues of habitus in terms of the current difficulties that they were experiencing in attending a university largely populated

by middle class students whose material capital gave them academic advantages, because they did not have to work and could afford better equipment and materials, and whose affective cultural capital gave them an assured confidence with which working class students could not identify. These students felt like fish-out-of -water when their working class habitus and capital encountered the field of elitist higher education.

Other constraints on working class applicants' choice include the geographical, the financial and the academic. Increasingly more working class students are living at home (particularly in London) for financial reasons to do with debt aversion (Callender, 2003) limiting the range of universities to which they can apply. Academically, middle class students (Reay et al., 1997) are more likely to have better A level results from 'better' schools and to have received private tuition than working class students, who were more likely to be working, as well as studying - "practices which make the possibility of attaining grades which would make elite universities a realistic goal easy for some and far more difficult for others.' (Reay et al., 1997, p. 862).

INFORMATION

 Lack of access to good quality advice, information and guidance is a barrier at all stages for
under-represented groups. (UCAS, 2002, p. 14)

Both the school students and the USAD undergraduates complained about the difficulties that they were having, or had previously experienced, in accessing information, advice and guidance from teachers and careers advisers.

> *I was really disappointed that I didn't get much help. People assume that we all live at home or that they [families] can help us with things like forms. (First year undergraduate)*

Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003, p. 101) suggest three main reasons why working class young people are not as well informed as their middle class counterparts:

> that working class people know fewer people who have experienced higher education; that schools and colleges supply less information to those from working class backgrounds; and that the information needed by working class potential applicants is itself more complex than that needed by their middle class counterparts.

Ball and Vincent in their work on parental school choice (1998, p. 392) make a distinction between 'hot' knowledge, which is heard on the 'grapevine' and is unevenly distributed across, and used differently by different social groups, and 'cold' formal or official knowledge provided by institutions and professionals such as teachers and careers advisers. Since all of the interviewees came from families with no previous HE participation their access to reliable forms of 'hot' knowledge was limited. The situation was complicated by

the subject matter: there is little tradition in working class communities of progression to art and design courses:

> While for the middle classes it's as important to be an art student as an artist – it's a 'high profile, popular culture thing to be', this has little relevance for lower income groups for whom art has long been considered to have little relevance either in cultural or vocational terms. (Glasgow School of Art in UUK, 2002, p. 47)

Both cohorts of interviewees reported that their careers advisers and teachers had limited knowledge of art and design and tried to 'put us off' by suggesting other courses of study and career, most notably those with clear vocational routes like business and information technology (IT).

> *They know more about maths, science, business and computing…which is alright if you want to do maths, science, business and computing. (Year 11 student)*

Art teachers knew the most about art and design but often just suggested their own degree discipline and place of study.

So, as well as lack of access to good sources of 'hot' knowledge, the interviewees were struggling to access good quality, impartial 'cold' knowledge, advice and guidance on their chosen subject. Moreover, what guidance the interviewees did receive was directive rather than impartial and tried to influence them into choosing careers which have clearer vocational routes and more financial security than art and design, betraying both the advisers' lack of understanding of the discipline, and a possible stereotyping of working class students as interested only in the instrumental benefits of higher education (Morley, 2005).

The first year undergraduates who had obviously managed to access information well enough to make a successful application to USAD described it as, what Reay et al. (2005, p. 5) call, a 'triumph of the will'. Sheer determination had driven them to undertake their own research into degree subjects and universities, but it had not always been easy: I*t's been so difficult for me to get here.* (First year undergraduate student)

This contrasts sharply with the experiences of the middle class students in Reay et al.'s (2005) research, whose family and institutional habitus meant that they had little need for careers advice because it only confirmed the 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge that they acquired through their social and institutional networks.

APPLICATIONS

Application to higher education art and design courses is complicated. It usually involves an extra unfunded year in further education, to undertake a general art and design foundation course, two possible routes of UCAS application (routes A and B) and, crucially, the production of a portfolio of art work which is the main determinant of who is

admitted to art and design degrees. So important is the production of a portfolio, that private schools sometimes employ fractional USAD staff to give portfolio advice to their students.

My professional involvement with developing the USAD website provided opportunities to conduct interviews with academic staff about what they look for in applications and interviews. They reported that the putting together of a portfolio is extremely sophisticated. A portfolio is not just a general collection of recent artwork; it has to be tailored for each discipline: a portfolio for fashion is very different from a portfolio for fine art. Tutors are not just interested in finished work and a high level of skill, but also in sketch books, where students detail their research and inspiration, and record the development of ideas.

The issue of class and portfolio production is summed up in Universities UK's 2002 report 'Social Class and Participation' (p. 49):

> The strong emphasis on the portfolio for admission to art school makes it a very different matter from the typical admission to university…the portfolio process is complex and pupils from deprived areas where admission to art school is a rarity are often ill equipped to develop a portfolio of high standard. Further, they typically do not have access to adequate facilities and materials, either at school or at home.

Glasgow School of Art pioneered portfolio advice work in some of Glasgow's poorest schools. Staff working on the project stress that:

> There's a lot of work to do to get these portfolios up to scratch. If you go to some of the better schools around here and some of the private schools, there's an enormous amount of resources spent on staff time and materials – pupils from these schools have their own studios virtually. We're dealing with kids in schools who have no room to do anything.   This is why we are going to bring some of them into art school, to give them studio space.   If you live in one of these tenements where are you going to set up your easel? It's one of the reasons why access in this subject is so difficult. (UUK, 2002, p. 49)

The undergraduate students I interviewed in 2003 talked about their difficulties in putting a portfolio together, the costs involved and bringing it for review:

> *They [teachers] just didn't have time to help us all individually with our portfolios. I just kept thinking 'I've come all the way from the north-east and spent £300 of me Mam and Dad's money for nothing'.*
> *The whole portfolio thing, leaving it and coming back to see if you've got an interview, was a nightmare.*

For working class applicants, the putting together of a portfolio is to art and design what essay writing is to HE generally: an 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis, 2001).

INTERVIEWS

Royal Ballet School (RBS) Interviewer:

"Billy, can you tell us why you first became interested in the ballet?"

Billy:

"Dunno, I just was."

RBS Interviewer:

"Well, was there any particular aspect of the ballet which caught your imagination?"

Billy:"The dancin'."

RBS Interviewer:

"Mr. Elliot [Billy's dad], are you a fan of the ballet?"

Billy's dad:

"I wouldn't exactly say I was an expert."

From the film 'Billy Elliot' (2000).

In discussion with university tutors about what they were looking for at interview, they expressed a strong desire to be 'fair' although clearly there are differing definitions of what constitutes being 'fair' (Schwartz, 2004). When portfolios are very good, the interview is largely a formality, when they were in the mid range (the majority) then tutors use the interview to assess such 'attributes' as motivation, enthusiasm and interest and whether these were students they could teach (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). What this means in practice is that some applicants, predominantly those who are middle class, are able to talk their way onto the course.

Tutors revealed that the interview questions are the standard ones you would expect from any university course: 'Why do you want to come to this university?' 'Why do you want to study this course?' What is interesting and revealing were the standard art and design questions which are asked about the interviewee's interests and 'influences', questions such as: 'Who is your favourite artist or designer?' 'What was the last exhibition you saw?' 'What books do you read?' 'What's your favourite film?' 'What's your favourite shop?' These questions are ostensibly designed to reveal what influences a candidate's work and whether they can use a variety of media as research tools. What became clear, however, was that not only was there a clear list of likely interview questions, there was a list of almost canonical 'right' answers (McManus et al., 2005). Knowledge of contemporary artists was expected, as was attendance at certain galleries and exhibitions. Art house films and 'literature' were 'in'; mainstream and popular cinema was out. Shops had to be expensive and stylish or trendy and quirky. These questions are seen as standardised, neutral and objective, across the art and design academy, but are actually implicated in racialised and classed practices. The acceptable answers reflect white middle class habitus, cultural capital and 'taste.' Admissions tutors, albeit unconsciously, are looking to appoint in the image of their own habitus and cultural capital for reasons it could be argued, to do with concepts of 'high taste' (Bourdieu, 1991), feelings of familiarity and comfort, and pedagogical ideology and practices: this is a person of high taste (like me), this is someone I feel comfortable teaching and can teach (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

Admissions tutors would be horrified to think that their interview practices are discriminatory because, as Gillborn and Youdell (2000) point out in their research into secondary school admissions practices, 'many teachers are passionately committed to challenging the very inequality that they participate in reinforcing' (p.134). However, like secondary school teachers, university admissions tutors are increasingly required to select students on the basis of who will benefit most from the limited resources available; effectively 'rationing education' (p. 134) to certain privileged social and ethnic groups. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) use the analogy of medical triage, the system the medical profession, particularly in emergency situations, use to decide where to direct resources on the basis of who is most likely to benefit (in extreme cases, survive) and who will benefit the least (in extreme cases, die). They use this medical analogy to describe what currently happens in secondary school admissions processes, a system they call 'educational triage' and which, they argue, encourages the selection of white middle class students, particularly by the 'best' schools. The analogy of educational triage is equally applicable to higher education admissions where again, unaware of 'these particular fruits of their labour' (p. 222), the behaviour of admissions tutors belies their intentions to challenge inequality, constitutes 'academic gatekeeping' (Burke 2002, p. 85), re-privileges the privileged and is a form of social closure.

In 'The Love of Art' (1991), Bourdieu details the findings of his survey of European art galleries which suggested that the European middle classes were more likely to visit art galleries and museums than the working classes and that when the working classes did visit they were more likely to look at furniture, ceramics and folk art than fine art, modern or abstract art. This was not, Bourdieu found, because of the cost or location of galleries, but was to do with habitus and cultural capital. A love of art transmitted by middle class parents to their children gives them an art loving and appreciating disposition. Moreover, middle class families were more likely to own books on art, and talk about art, leading their children to develop an interest in the subject, a critical eye and to become 'people of taste.' Bourdieu discovered that the middle classes felt much more comfortable in galleries than the working classes: "Members of the cultivated class feel entitled and obliged to visit this hallowed ground of culture from which others feel excluded for lack of culture" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 102). He described his findings as 'obvious truths' (p. 108) and challenged: "(the) myth of an innate taste which owes nothing to the constraints of apprenticeship or chance information since it has been bestowed in its entirety since birth" (p. 109).

Bourdieu's findings contrast starkly with the view of knowledge, ability and talent found in the admissions process in the art and design academy, which persists in framing selection interviews around what are seen as legitimate forms of cultural capital. This position takes a hegemonic, neo-liberal meritocratic view of education, as a process of natural selection which determines who is right for the best jobs and positions in society, and credits the high participation rates amongst the middle classes to natural intelligence and talent, and the lower participation rates amongst the working classes to lower levels of intelligence, ability, talent and motivation (Archer et al., 2003).

Inherent in the persistent selecting of students from middle class backgrounds on the basis of habitus and cultural capital is a fear of the pollution of the academy by working class students (Skeggs, 1997). This fear is nothing new:

> The presence in the universities of relatively large numbers of students who lack the advantages of a *cultured* home background has forced upon universities a number of problems of teaching and the organisation of university life. (UGC 1953, p. 24, cited in Archer et al., p. 31, my emphasis).

Further, the recognition of the impact that habitus and cultural capital, along with material and social capital, has in enabling or not enabling those from different class backgrounds to enter a prestigious university, challenges those in the academy who would prefer to believe that their own positions were achieved entirely through ability and motivation and have little to do with relative privilege (Morley, 1997). Reflexivity may be the preserve of the middle classes (Skeggs, 1997) but they do not always want to use it.

CONCLUSION

Issues of class definitely impact on issues of choice, applications and admissions to prestigious arts university and to prestigious universities generally. Firstly, working class students de-select themselves from prestigious universities because of issues of habitus and identity. Secondly, although working class applicants have a greater need of good sources of formal advice and information than their middle class counterparts, who have good networks of both informal and formal information, they are less likely to receive it. This has grave implications for the production of a good portfolio, so essential for entry to art and design courses. Finally, and crucially, when working class students apply to USAD, to the art and design academy and to most 'old' universities, they are expected to reflect middle class habitus, and cultural capital, and "must fashion themselves in the tradition of the traditional higher education applicant" (Reay et al., p. 106) in order to succeed. This situation must be challenged if we are to avoid perpetuating a highly class stratified higher education system in the UK.

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