

Book Review

Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education: Phronesis, Art and Non-traditional Students

Broadhead, S. and Gregson, M., Palgrave Macmillan, Papeback,
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Samantha Broadhead and Margaret Gregson's book 'Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education: Phronesis, Art and Non-traditional Students' is a meaningful and relevant book. It applies the ideas of two very different thinkers, Basil Bernstein (1924 - 2000) and Aristotle (c.384BC - c.322BC), to articulate a thoughtful and provoking perspective on current, 'non-traditional' student experience of Art and Design in Higher Education (HE).

Non-traditional Students

The term 'non-traditional student' is not a straightforward or easily defined descriptor. As the book points out, the term includes 'non-standard, second-chance, first in the family, delayed traditional, single parents, late starters, careerists [and] wage-slave-escapees.' (p.5) Broadhead and Gregson argue that the term 'disguises the class based selection in HE' (p.1) and that now is an appropriate time to be returning to Bernstein's writing on what constitutes a democratic education. For Bernstein a democratic education is one that provides all students with equal access to 'enhancement, inclusion and participation' (p.27) and which offers all students an opportunity to be politically active in relation to their educational

experiences. Broadhead and Gregson use Bernstein's model, in relation to Art and Design HE learning, but a return to what can be seen to be the fundamentals of inclusion issues is of relevance to a wider HE readership.

What is Phronesis?

Broadhead and Gregson also advocate the Aristotelian term 'phronesis' as a useful way of conceptualising the kinds of knowledge and experience non-traditional students bring to their studies and the kind of informed action they must take if they are to succeed. The term 'phronesis' roughly translates into 'practical wisdom' (Flyvbjerg 1992) but this translation does not communicate the wider implications of Aristotle's use of it because ideas about wisdom and goodness were indivisible in his frame of reference (Russell 1984).

Aristotle understands phronesis to be one of three types of wisdom, the other two being episteme and techne. In the English translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, episteme is translated as science or scientific knowledge and techne as art, craft or skills (Flyvbjerg 1992: p.341). It is interesting to note that the derivatives of these two terms are still with us in words like epistemology and technique whereas there are no comparable descendants of the term phronesis (Flyvbjerg 1992). What Broadhead and Gregson advocate, in their return to this neglected aspect of Aristotle's analysis, addresses the conceptual lack implied by this absence of derivative terminology.

The term phronesis describes the kind of knowledge that is contingent upon a particular situation or context. In contrast with episteme, it is the type of knowledge that enables an individual to act in response to a shifting set of circumstances. Political wisdom can be an example of phronesis, as is an ability to think through the implications of theories (or principles) but move beyond them when necessary. Phronesis produces understandings and actions that achieve a desired understanding and outcome, in relation to existing theories and principles as well as the power dynamics in play at any given time.

The Signature Pedagogies of Art and Design

Broadhead and Gregson use the term *phronesis* to develop understandings of the actions and experiences of four non-traditional student case-studies, enrolled on undergraduate, creative arts courses in HE. Their analysis offers insights into specific manifestations of exclusionary practice and the book does not shy away from the troubling conclusions of its primary research. In its discussion of the narrative accounts of the student case studies, it illuminates the very real impact of what are described as the 'signature pedagogy' of art and design higher education. (Shreeve et al 2010).

The accepted pedagogic practices that make up these signature pedagogies have developed to produce particular discourses within British Art schools. This reflects the specificity of the educational cultures that have developed (Llewellyn 2015). Studio practice, in particular, is seen as a central feature of the education experience as is what is described as 'the crit', where tutors publicly assess and critique students' work. The latter requires the ability to accept what is often a robust and public criticism. Broadhead and Gregson argue that non-traditional students sometimes 'missed out on the implicit strategies for success or the unspoken rules of the game' that are part of what enables a successful outcome.' (2018: p.150). They describe these as the 'hidden codes' (2018: p.50).) of an art and design education and, as their book demonstrates, a lack of understanding of these can have a significant impact.

A Democratic Education?

Only one of the student case studies received what could be described as a democratic education. This, Broadhead and Gregson argue, is because she felt comfortable in the studio, could take a leading role in relation to her peers and was socially confident and articulate. The other students did not receive a democratic education and implicit in the analysis of their narrative

accounts, is the conclusion that their gender, race, class, age and caring responsibilities, all contributed to a lack of confidence within the specific cultural arena of the art and design HE context. The over-arching structural problems can be seen to relate to social class but this intersects (Crenshaw 1993) in complex ways with exclusionary practice in relation to gender, race and caring responsibilities. For example Chad took a year out to have a baby which had significant implications for her sense of inclusion on the course. Eliza, as the only black student participant, found that though she was accepted onto the course as a part-time-student, this had implications for the way that she was included in course culture. As a professional with an MSc and an existing career in management, she made attempts to address the issues but found that her confidence was eroded and her sense of marginality had profound implications.

In the case of three of Broadhead and Gregson's case studies, it meant that, as non-traditional students, they were constructed as 'pedagogised others' (Atkinson 2003; Hatton 2012). They were marginalised from their course cultures in ways that were deeply problematic. The uncertainty of the studio space, as well as the hidden norms of behaviour expected of them, all contributed to a lack of success and a dissatisfaction with both their own achievements and the education provided by their courses. This was in contrast to their experiences of their Access courses which had been positive and empowering.

Access Courses as Repair Systems

Access courses have been described as 'repair systems' for an inherently excluding HE system (Broadhead and Gregson, 2018: p.51). They provide a different route into HE for students who, for whatever reason, lack the more traditional qualifications required for undergraduate study. The early Access Courses were set up as part of a drive by New Labour, to foreground widening participation within UK educational policy and practice (Burke and McManus, 2011: p.700). But as Burke and McManus point out, 'persistent patterns of under-representation continue' (2011: p.700). This

means that it is no longer safe to assume that simply giving students an opportunity to enroll on a creative arts HE course is necessarily a good thing. The book asks the question - should students from non-traditional backgrounds be encouraged to apply for places on art and design courses that may not allow them to achieve their goals? The conclusions drawn by Broadhead and Gregson are that more work needs to be done if we are to answer this question in the affirmative.

A Political, Educational and Ethical Call to Arms

My reading of this book is as a political, educational and ethical call to arms. If we cannot answer the above question in the affirmative, we need to think carefully about the role of creative art and design HE learning. If the pedagogic processes do seem to reconstruct exclusionary practices we need to consider, more carefully, the strategies students are using to negotiate these processes. It is not enough to view the repair work that Access courses take on, as being purely about increasing the numbers of non-traditional students who are accepted onto courses, but in learning from their experiences in order to make radical changes to course structures and curricula.

Broadhead and Gregson's advocacy of the concept of 'phronesis' in thinking about how students can use what they learn in a productive and empowering way is valuable. We can extend this to the process by which we endeavour to translate the ideals and ethical principles that underpin an inclusion agenda, and which Bernstein understood as being fundamental to a democratic education into truly inclusive pedagogic practice. This requires, I would argue both an examination of what a traditional student is and an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1993).

As Theuri points out, 'normality' in education is still often conflated with 'whiteness' (cited in Broadhead and Gregson, 2018: p.182). Using Bernstein, we can identify the ways that this follows the fault lines of the class based exclusionary practice that he so convincingly critiqued. If the notion of normality in art and design HE education makes sense only in

relation to a pedagogised other (Atkinson 2003, Hatton 2012) it is necessary to take issue with this normality and to develop more pluralistic expectations of students' paths to success.

Bel hooks argues that it is only as our students respond to, and critique, what we are teaching them, that we can really begin to understand the relevance of our theories (cited in Hall, 1992: p. 294). This is particularly relevant in relation to inclusion research where there is an understood division between theory and practice and where the implications of this is so important. An ability to act with *phronesis* is for Broadhead and Gregson something that we should explicitly be trying to encourage in our students. This is a compelling argument and one that is well-made in the book. However, it can also be argued that the ability to act with *phronesis* can enable students to critically engage with this ongoing theory/practice divide. That it can help to produce the shared strategies by which both students and educators intervene in the institutions within which they work teach and learn in order to effect real change.

There is no doubt that the practice of teaching in Higher Education requires an engagement with ideas explored in the theoretical writing on inclusion. As McManus and Burke point out, the specificities of art and design pedagogy means that teaching practitioners and theorists in this field are relatively under-represented in the debates about how to put theories into practice (210, p. 125). Broadhead and Gregson's book, with its return to some of the fundamentals of inclusion research and its examinations of the implications of accepted practice in an art and design HE context, provides a model for HE teaching practice more broadly. It encourages an interactive dialogue between students, scholars and HE educators and is of relevance to all who are interested in developing more inclusive, dialogic learning experiences.

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