Widening participation; widening capability

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This paper proposes that widening participation in higher education might distinctively be conceptualised beyond economically driven human capital outcomes, as a matter of widening capability. Specifically, the paper proposes forming the capability of students to become and to be 'strong evaluators', able to make reflexive and informed choices about what makes a good life for each of them. Evaluating equality and justice in higher education, and specifically the case of 'widening participation', is then greatly advanced by considering the conceptual tools provided by Amartya Sen's capability approach. The paper therefore elaborates on Sen's ideas and demonstrates their applicability in relation to widening participation student voices gathered in research interviews. Important though Sen's ideas are, there are barriers that stand in the way of taking up these ideas educationally. While three such barriers are acknowledged in the paper, four resources of possibility for recovering widening participation as capability formation from neoliberal and other forms of instrumentalism are also sketched.

Keywords: widening participation; higher education policy; equality; capability formation; student learning

Introduction

This paper employs a definition of widening participation[1] to refer specifically to policy and practices which enable students who are the first in their families both to access university and to participate in and benefit from higher education. 'First generation' is taken as an indicator of social class and the continuing under-representation of working-class students in higher education, especially in elite UK universities. However, widening participation is also a component of the economic purposes which are driving higher education expansion, market approaches and human capital outcomes (Morley 2003; Evans 2004; Archer 2007). In such terms access is expanded (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2001), but educational purposes narrowed. But despite expanded provision, students from working-class backgrounds continue to be under-represented (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003). As both Evans (2004) and Morley (2003) explain, while quantitative change in the numbers of students now in higher education is important, numbers alone do not signify radical shifts in higher education cultures.

I therefore propose in this paper that widening participation might rather be distinctively conceptualised as a matter of 'widening capability' and specifically the capability of students to become and be 'strong evaluators' (Taylor 1985), with a rich capacity for critical thinking, able to make reflexive and informed choices about what makes a good life for each of them. The argument is advanced as a counter to widening participation policy which is not necessarily to foster strong evaluators at all, nor is even much in practice about social inclusion (Archer 2007), but more to contribute to human capital and wealth creation. Notwithstanding this restrictive policy environment, I propose that elaborating the parameters of a genuinely just society and

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evaluating equality in higher education, specifically here the case of 'widening participation', is greatly advanced by considering the conceptual tools provided by Amartya Sen's (1992, 1999) capability approach. The paper therefore elaborates on Sen's ideas and demonstrates their applicability in relation to selected widening participation student voices. Timely and important though Sen's ideas are, there are nonetheless barriers that stand in the way of taking up these ideas educationally. While three such barriers are acknowledged in the paper, four resources of possibility are also sketched for recovering widening participation as capability and strong evaluation from neoliberal and other forms of instrumentalism.

Fundamental to the paper is the assumption that researching widening participation and related inequalities in teaching and learning requires that we articulate a normative view of the purposes of higher education in order to inform education policy, institutional practices, and pedagogical processes. To do this we need to ask what sort of equality ought higher education to be promoting for widening participation students. We then need a metric of justice and equality to evaluate action and change. As Sen points out, how we evaluate injustice and inequality is shaped by our choice of what we wish to equalise. He argues (1992, 1999, 2003a) that we ought to evaluate equality in the space of 'capabilities', what we have reason to value doing and being. What he offers is the opportunity to reclaim a hopeful language of equality and diversity, of choice and aspiration, and of agency and well-being from the oppressive effects of neoliberal policy discourse. Equality would be a central educational and political value and policy would need to be directed towards structures that foster and secure the valuable capabilities that enable reasoned reflection, and to dismantle the barriers to full justice for widening participation students. Equality in higher education in these terms would mean equality of valuable capabilities (Walker 2006a). In turn this would require addressing the cultural, social and institutional structures and arrangements which generate capability failure, for example the cultural barriers identified by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and elaborated for higher education in the UK by Reay (1998), Evans (2004), Hey (2003) and Morley (2003), amongst others. More concretely this would mean looking at the fair distribution of knowledge, skills, abilities and qualifications and the doing of equality in higher education (Thomson 1999).

Three developments make the question of justice and equality for widening participation and higher education especially significant. The first is the establishment in October 2007 in the UK of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, which identifies education, including higher education, as an area in which the UK is not fully promoting equality. The earlier Equalities Review (2007) noted that if the current momentum towards equality is maintained in the UK, it will take until 2085 to close the gender pay gap; until 2105 to close the ethnic employment gap; that the disability employment gap will probably never be closed; and that the ethnic qualification gap will definitely never be closed and may even get worse. As higher education is a key factor in social mobility this raises questions about the barriers and constraints to genuine freedom and fair access to opportunities, and the barriers and constraints to a life of genuine and valuable choices for each individual. This matters because research demonstrates that getting a university degree brings increased income, but also better health and well-being and greater civic participation (Schuller et al. 2002).

Secondly, higher education in the UK has been particularly affected by rapid economic and technological changes of the knowledge economy such that economic policies drive higher education (Delanty 2001; Department for Education and Skills 2003; Peters 2004). Increasingly higher education is discussed for its contribution to human capital, employability and economic growth. Policy, student experiences, and graduate outcomes are then evaluated in terms of these ends. There is now much less talk about universities' role in traditional liberal learning, about the role the humanities and social sciences play in society, or about higher education's contribution to democratic life, social well-being and the public good. While not romanticising

earlier periods of higher education or the 'misuse' of higher education by a social elite, Evans (2004) nonetheless suggests that there has been a palpable shift from valuing independent and critical thought, to valuing the marketplace and the economy. Expanded graduate numbers for a knowledge economy do not, she says, indicate 'any absolute increase in human skill, let alone human satisfaction' (23), the latter borne out by recent reporting that growing material wealth in the UK has not been accompanied by increased levels of happiness (Strauss 2008). Nor, she adds, have these changes in higher education particularly shifted the class structure in the UK or the distribution of significant academic power and resources.

Thirdly, Sen's work has influenced research undertaken for the Equalities Review by Burchardt and Vizard (2007), and a version of capabilities has been adopted by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission as the measure of inequalities. The Commission draws on the final report of the Equalities Review (2007, 1), which argues that an equal society means 'to live in a society that is fair and freer, and which provides for each individual to realise his or her potential to the fullest'. The Executive Summary notes that traditional approaches to evaluating equality have been based on a focus on income or wealth, rather than on what is important to people's well-being, that is, having a life that is good for them, and the social, economic and political arrangements that either support or constrain agency, well-being and quality of life. Therefore the Review noted that: 'An equal society seeks equality in the freedoms people have to lead a fulfilling life' (2007, 5). Using Sen's capability language, it rehearses the importance of 'identifying the various substantive freedoms, activities and aspects of wellbeing that our society considers important for everyone' (126).

To this end a list of central and valuable human freedoms were drafted, revised through public consultation, and subsequently incorporated into the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. The Commission's 10 dimensions,[2] based on international human rights, consultation with the general public and individuals and groups at high risk of disadvantage, include dimensions relevant to the project of widening participation, for example 'the capability to be knowledgeable, to understand and reason, and to have the skills to participate in society'. This capability is elaborated to include:

> attain the highest possible standard of knowledge, understanding and reasoning; be creative; be fulfilled intellectually; develop the skills in productive and valued activities; learn about a range of cultures and beliefs and acquire the skills to participate in a multicultural society; access education, training and lifelong learning that meets individual needs; access information and technology necessary to participate in society. (The Equalities Review 2007, 127)

Widening capability

Following the Commission's concern for a just society in the UK, I propose that we also need to ask how higher education contributes to the formation of a society which is free, fair and equal in the way it provides for each individual to realise his or her fullest potential reflectively to choose and lead a good life. Widening participation in these terms is then understood as 'widening capability'. This metric of equality, based on people's capabilities, has been developed by Sen (1992, 1999, 2003a), in the first instance, and by Nussbaum (2000, 2006), who has expanded and deepened the philosophical basis for capabilities. It is a normative framework for an interpersonal evaluation of individual well-being – what is ultimately good for each person living that life now and in the future – and social arrangements in order to inform social change and action to enhance people's freedoms to have a wide capability set or wide capabilities.

Sen (1992) is foundationally concerned with capabilities as the metric of justice and equality to evaluate interpersonal comparisons, rather than using metrics of justice derived from individual preferences or income and wealth (ideas echoed by the Commission). He argues that we

might adapt our preferences and how satisfied we say we are to accommodate our constrained life chances, in ways which do not necessarily serve the best interests of the chooser. Nor does he advocate a metric purely from income and resources, as human capital theory does in ascribing only instrumental value to education, because income distribution by itself does not wholly capture structures of inequality or how diverse individuals are able to 'convert' their bundle of resources into capabilities and functionings. Nonetheless, Sen still argues that inequalities of income and wealth are important, given the persistence of social class origins and destinies and social divisions in societies and he is clear that even if our concern is with quality of life, inequalities of wealth 'may tell us things about the generation and persistence of inequalities of other types' (2003a, 10).

Although Sen (2003b) argues that a focus on economic growth does not tell us why growth is important, he does not eschew human capital – for example, that an investment in education promotes economic growth. But unlike neoliberal policy, he argues that we ought not to account for higher education's value to individuals and society only in economic terms. Education is of intrinsic importance in that being educated is a valuable achievement in itself, for its own sake. Sen writes that: 'The benefits of education thus exceed its role as human capital in commodity production. The broader human capability perspective would record – and value – these additional roles' (2003b, 35). The capability approach would acknowledge that for widening participation students having expanded economic opportunities is important and we would need to consider both how higher education enabled this, but also how economic arrangements like labour markets might constrain career chances for some. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) for example critique the discourse of employability's emphasis on individual qualities, which obscures social inequalities so that the labour market and employment opportunities are far from equal for different kinds of students from different types of universities. But a capability discourse would also value non-economic ends and more expansive understandings of what is valuable in human lives and for human flourishing.

Rather than income or preferences, Sen argues for equality of capabilities, the real and actual freedoms people have to do and to be what they value being and doing. Development ought then to consist in 'expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (Sen 1999, 1) through 'the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency' (Sen 1999, xii). Educational development in such terms means the expansion of human capability sets:

> The capability set represents a person's freedom to achieve various functioning combinations. If freedom is intrinsically important, then the alternative combinations available for choice are all relevant for judging a person's advantage, even though he or she will eventually choose only an alternative. (Sen 2003a, 8)

The analytical reach of capabilities would then encompass evaluating how opportunity is distributed interpersonally across student diversities of race, gender, social class, disability, and so on, and in and through social arrangements of stratified institutions and the unequal opportunities that such stratification secures (Archer 2007).

For Sen it is not so much the achieved functionings (what we can *actually* do or be, as opposed to our opportunity freedom to be and to do) that matter, as the real opportunities that one has to achieve those functionings. It is then up to the individual what they do with their freedoms. At the same time, as Fleurbaey (2006) has pointed out, Sen does not advocate a pure theory of opportunities which does not also take account of achievements. Rather his concern is that a focus only on achievements may miss the freedom dimension, including the freedom to choose from genuine options. However, in higher education, both capability and functioning are important (Walker 2006a). We need to observe the functionings of students as a proxy for their

capabilities. If working-class students do not have equal capability to speak confidently compared with middle-class students, for example, then we would need to adjust institutional and pedagogical arrangements.

But for higher education, I suggest that it also involves specifying what valuable capabilities are – whether through reasoned inclusive public discussion as Sen advocates (1992), or through defining a list of central capabilities as Nussbaum (2000) does. Certainly one might argue that without specifying some core capabilities as the content of social justice in higher education, capabilities might not take higher education policy and practice far enough (Nussbaum 2006; Walker 2006a). To develop justice in higher education, I propose, requires attention to how widening participation students are enabled to determine what their relationship is to some idea of what is, for them, a good life, 'to reach for conceptions of the good that will affect the direction of our [their] lives' (Greene 1995, 1), and the capabilities that are constitutive of such practical reasoning. It is similar to Charles Taylor's (1985) concept of 'strong evaluation', which Taylor explains as being able to evaluate and re-evaluate some ethical values or ideals or goods to be more important than others. These self-understandings constitute who we are. To develop students' capability as strong evaluators is to develop them as agents able to reflect on and re-examine their valued ends, when challenged to do so through teaching and learning experiences. Students would reflect on what is of more or less ethical significance in the narrative interpretation of their lives. Quality in learning for widening participation students (and indeed all students) would require integrating learning the subject and developing reflexive judgements about what makes life good for that person.

In order to illustrate my argument, I draw on selected student voices from research interviews conducted for two projects on students' experiences of university and learning, one of which was specifically framed by a concern with widening participation (Walker 2006b),[3] the other (Walker 2008)[4] by a broader concern with the relationship between discipline-based research and teaching. The specific interest in the latter project is with the sub-set of students who were the first in their families to attend university. The variation in the experiences recounted further demonstrates that we ought not to homogenise first-generation students, who will differ along axes of ethnicity and gender as well as social class, or construct them in deficit terms. There are examples here of students flourishing in the face of academic demands, but also of student struggle. Rather, what is needed is attention to the social and educational arrangements that foster capability formation or capability failure.

Drawing now on the second project's interview data (Walker 2008), I suggest that the comments which follow from Narend, a History student who graduated with a first-class degree in 2007 from a Russell Group university and was the first in his family to attend university, capture what I have in mind both in having a wide capability set and, integral to that, in being able to form his own conception of the good. Here Narend reflects on his third-year special subject on southern Africa and what he has learned. He offers a slightly complicated account; on the one hand his course on 'Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa' has 'made me very pessimistic on the ability of individuals to really work against the kind of tide', but he does not see having this knowledge as making his life less good:

> I wouldn't want to be ignorant of this [knowledge]. I'm not saying things are hopeless, the best way I can describe it is with an analogy, it's like saying if you had cancer and you had six weeks to live, would you rather know or would you rather not? I'd say I'd rather know because then I could plan out what I was going to do and make sure I say goodbye to everyone. So I think once you realise the constraints then you can kind of work within it, then you can try and do little things that can make a difference. I just think the idea that if I didn't know about this then it would make my life better, I strongly disagree, I think it would probably make my life worse … . I think that's kind of the price you have to kind of pay for knowledge. … I'm hoping that the module has enhanced my ability to argue and to analyse material and I believe it's improved my general knowledge of the area. I guess

just studying something I'm interested in all along, it's made me decide that if I'm going to do a career, I want to do something I enjoy and something that's relevant to me and I feel that there's no point, I feel that I'm quite good at what I do and I think why should I just do something like banking if I'd rather, I think it's made me want to sort of follow my ambitions rather than just kind of go after money, so to speak. (Interview, 5 March 2007)

In this case, higher education has expanded Narend's valued beings and doings and his capability to reason about his conception of the good in ways which suggest a confident and reflexive navigation of his future. The distinctive idea of widening participation as widening capability to become and be strong evaluators addresses the important issue of widening participation to what and for what.

What stands in the way of widening capability?

However, as sociologists of widening participation (e.g. Reay 1998; Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Archer 2007; Raphael Reed, Gates, and Last 2007) explain, much stands in the way of optimism around widening participation and reducing inequalities in teaching and learning, and hence of course also capabilities. I now focus on three overlapping barriers.

1.　Neoliberalism and human capital theory

The first barrier is the dominance of human capital theory, which, as noted earlier, views higher education as primarily instrumental – an investment to improve productivity and the level and distribution of individual earnings. This is exemplified in the UK White Paper on Higher Education (2003, 58), which argues that: 'Our economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based … . These trends demand a more highly skilled workforce … with modern skills at all levels … which employers are prepared to pay a significant premium for'. Individual benefits are in the first instance economic and only secondarily social. The effect of human capital theory for higher education has been to ascribe a premium value to investment in individual students for increased economic productivity, higher incomes and augmented national wealth.

What also stands in the way, as Archer (2007) has argued, is how New Labour higher education policy has captured and subverted the radical and egalitarian potential of widening participation by its pursuit of neoliberal policies. Fundamental to this project has been the hollowing-out of important justice concepts like choice, diversity, aspiration, and potentially now, even equality. Archer argues that New Labour has sought to link equality and diversity in ways which are conceptually incompatible by embedding them in marketisation and human capital education policy. This in turn shapes a diversified higher education sector of gold, silver and bronze institutions (Ainley 2003), in which widening participation students are over-represented in the silver and bronze where they are offered a version of higher education for an inclusive 'learning society', rather than higher education for participation in the more powerful knowledge economy. Diversification in these terms really means stratification. High-status jobs go to middle-class students from elite universities. Student diversity, Archer argues, is equally problematic, in that not all students are equally valued or have access to forms of provision of equal status. Choice is illusory, shaped by structural location and background. Refusing to aspire to higher education is then misguided, and working-class students are pathologised and blamed. To this colonisation of diversity must be added New Labour's evacuation of the language of equality to service the neoliberal project. What we are then left with is 'a fundamental and irreconcilable tension within New Labour's dual commitment to both an economic (neoliberal) and an equality agenda' which might 'fatefully' undermine widening participation (Archer 2007, 649).

2.   Purposive rationality

Turning to a pedagogical issue, 'critical thinking' is arguably the core capability that higher education claims to develop in all its students and would be central to becoming a 'strong evaluator'. Yet this has been reframed by neoliberal policy. Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) point to two different discourses that shape critical thinking. On the one hand there is the skills paradigm (found in discourses and practices of key skills, generic skills, transferable skills, and graduate attributes) embedded in purposive (instrumental) rationality, technicism and instrumentality, which is 'relevant to the roles of the customer of the state and consumer of services and goods, and not to the active participant in the possible transformation of the public sphere' (609). Under neoliberalism, the dominant policy and the pedagogical vocabulary emphasise skills, performativity and outcomes and a purposive rationality (instrumental and strategic) which domesticates critique. The idea is to optimise outcomes, in the case of UK higher education human capital outcomes, but these goals or ends are not open to critique: 'the skills perspective identifies uncritically with the criteriology of the sociopolitical system since it focuses so much on successful performance' (605–6).

Purposive rationality 'leads ultimately to an uncritical and complacent proclamation of performativity as a universal and a historical value', glorifying 'effectiveness, outcomes and performance' (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007, 607). Ends and meaningfulness are not questioned, nor goals revised; what matters is success in the task at hand. In this way higher education, and its fundamental claim to foster critical thinking, is captured by the neoliberal project, while ironically seeming still to serve its own values and purposes to develop 'higher order thinking'. Moreover, it may be that this limited form of critical thinking is more compatible with the learning society project that Archer (2007) identifies for bronze and silver universities and less fit for purpose in the gold universities, thereby perpetuating inequalities of provision and outcomes.

3.   'Pedagogies of disrepair'

The third barrier, also pedagogical, is that having accessed higher education, working-class students are less likely to be equipped with the cultural and linguistic capital which traditional higher education pedagogies take for granted, or to have 'the capacity to invest it profitably – which the system presupposes and consecrates without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 99). The specialist language in which disciplinary knowledge is presented is more likely to be accessible to middle-class students equipped with the requisite cultural capital and appropriate prior teaching and learning experiences. This sets up classroom cultures in which being confident and middle class is the norm against which all students are judged by each other and by lecturers.

What then eventuates are 'pedagogies of disrepair' (Luke 2006, 6) and capability failure in learning, exemplified in the story of Janet, a first-generation student studying Sociology and Social Policy at a Russell Group ('gold') university in 2001–2003. In interviews between 2002 and 2003, she explained how in her Sociology seminar, students were talking about their backgrounds and how they came to be at university. She thought that some of the class, like her, had parents who had not gone to university but they still said that they were middle class. 'It was just as if people don't really want to say they're working class … I don't know if they feel ashamed of it', she said. 'When other people are saying "Oh I don't think I'm working class", as if there's something really negative about that, as if you're like someone different or something, it makes you feel a bit uneasy at times' (interview, 18 May 2002). Janet lost confidence over her undergraduate degree, explaining that she did not expect to do as well as everyone else in the final year, even though she had done in the past. 'I don't know why', she said. 'I just seem to lack

that confidence', while her contact with unhelpful lecturers made her feel she was 'struggling' with the work. Janet in turn began to feel that maybe she was 'not fitting in or coping as well' as she had thought. In the final year students had to choose between a dissertation and an extended essay and she had chosen the essay because she did not think she could 'cope with doing a big long piece of research', but 'after I'd chosen the essay, everyone else on my course was doing the dissertation and I felt kind of inferior … I just kind of felt maybe I was taking the easy option, but … I've done it because I don't handle long pieces of research very well and I think I'd lost interest' (interview, 18 May 2003). She was unsure of her future direction, saying that 'there's something else I could have been more interested in'. She explained that 'I'm not as confident a person as I thought I might be by coming to university, I think I've lost a little bit in the last six months … I don't know, it's just my problem if other people think I'm inferior' (interview, 23 May 2003).

The point in this example is to underline that inclusive and equal teaching and learning in higher education does matter in the lives of individual widening participation students, and what they are able to be and to do in choosing a good life for themselves. But pedagogy undermines this process and perpetuates existing knowledge and power structures. If we focus our gaze on capabilities we would then have to ask what it was about the pedagogical arrangements that Janet encountered that converted her difference as a working-class student into a relational disadvantage (Terzi 2005). Pedagogy 'undoes' equality so that knowledge, skills and opportunities are not fairly distributed in Janet's classes.

Recovering widening participation from neoliberal instrumentalism

Where then is the ground for us to stand on to argue hopefully for widening participation as widening capability? I believe we do have resources for positive transformation in this direction and here I outline four.

1. Dysfunctionality of the human capital agenda

Notwithstanding the emphasis on human capital and high skills in higher education, the knowledge economy is not delivering the jobs promised, and it is not delivering them in particular to the young people targeted by widening participation policies. Numerous researchers point to this problem, including Brown (2003), on the 'opportunity trap'. Higher education opportunities are becoming harder to cash in as the number of graduates rise; opportunity based on education, jobs and rewards is 'unraveling'. David Turner (2007), writing in the *Financial Times*, reported the rise of graduates over-qualified for their jobs so that one in three graduates are in a job that does not require a degree. He cites research from the London School of Economics, conducted by Frances Green and Yu Tzu, that suggests that the career ambitions of growing numbers of young people will never be fulfilled. The report further confirms Moreau and Leathwood's (2006) argument about a growing educational divide between graduates of more and less prestigious universities, and also in the subjects studied. This is not to say that earnings ought to be the only criteria for choosing a university and a course. But this does reinforce the need to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to critique and understand better how the labour market works. We could add to this the growing evidence from economists which show how people in rich developed countries do not express greater well-being (happiness), despite greater material wealth (Gasper 2004; Strauss 2008), while the overview research by UNICEF (2007) into the well-being of children and adolescents in 21 economically advanced countries shows that the United Kingdom is in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six well-being measures reviewed.

2.   Communicative rationality

My second ground for hope lies in Papastephanou and Angeli's (2007, 618) argument that 'there is a surplus of critical thinking that cannot be canalized in the skill talk'. They employ Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, which is oriented to human potential and actions for mutual understanding, formative dialogue, self-analysis, and transformation of ends. They explain that our goals are not there 'simply to be achieved or approximated, but first and foremost to be checked in introspection, but more appropriately in deliberation' (2007, 609). The crucial dimension is the role of ethical goal revision – similar to Taylor's (1985) 'strong evaluation' – that is, being able to critique the task and its ends. A communicative rationality view of critical thinking would argue that 'a critical thinker cannot just be one who carries out an action success-fully, but chiefly one who considers and, when necessary, questions the appropriateness or moral relevance of the action' (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007, 608). Thus as Sen would also argue, what matters is to choose rationally and freely, where reason is not reduced to purposive rationality and critical skills nor domesticated to serve instrumental ends.

Notwithstanding the pedagogies of disrepair noted earlier, this can and does happen in higher education. Stella, also a first-generation student from the same class and course as Narend, reflects on her learning:

> Young people especially want to know the answers or to seek out answers in life and to feel, 'I know my view on capitalism, I know my views on socialism' and therefore I've made up my mind and you seek that because you want to feel certain in the world, that you have an opinion that's worth listening to. But actually being destabilised, being continually introduced to new ideas is very much a reflection of everyday life, that people's opinions change, you're introduced to new information, you might change your mind about what you feel about certain events … it's a very good attribute of a tutor to be able to continually remind you that you don't have the answers and that it is unrealistic to expect that you ever will have the answer but all we can ever do is engage with new information and argue from that … a good life is … that I have learned that that's [history] important to me. It's kind of a self, a growth thing. When you find that you're really good at hockey or whatever, that suddenly changes everything, that you then factor hockey in your life, for the rest of your life because you enjoy it so much … It's been an awakening to what I'm interested in. (Interview, 21 February 2007)

Here we see critical skills, knowledge of history, self-analysis and critique underpinning goal revision and practical reasoning about her life. The critical thinking capability she has developed through undertaking this course is not just a matter of skill and successful performance in completing assignments and seminar tasks, but an 'aporetic stance towards the "big picture" of which our acts and ideas are but a small part' (Papastephanou and Angeli 2007, 606). That (some) students are able to develop this capability and (some) lecturers and subjects work peda-gogically to foster it offers (some) grounds for hope.

3.   Reclaiming discourses of choice, agency and aspiration

My third ground for hope, and fundamental to well-being in the capability approach, is expanding genuine choices. Unfortunately the notion of choice has been successfully captured by neoliberal ideas in education (parental choice, school choice, etc.) to mostly mean no choice at all, or choice only for fractions of the middle and professional classes. Instead, the capability approach envisages genuinely enlarging people's choices about what they value choosing to be and to do. As Fukuda-Parr and Kumar (2003) explain, human development (and capability is integral to human development) and neoliberalism share some common roots, most notably in the liberal economic tradition that emphasises the fundamental importance of individual freedoms and choices. But the human development and capability paradigm is more expansive in its concern with non-economic issues and equality of opportunities and the human and social conditions for achieving genuinely free choices.

Being able to have genuine choices and options allows us to recognise the conscious and deliberative aspects of human agency, but also the way power and society erect barriers to full justice. We ought then to consider how to support and foster such agency, including making available critical vocabularies to say what is *not* available so that, in the case of higher education, working-class students might act as neither rational fools nor cultural dopes, but as human agents, so that through introspection and reflexivity, 'change can come about as the result of purposive action … Human agency can be turned against what constrains it through the explicit disavowal of the oppressive aspects of past practice' (Kabeer 2000, 48).

Being a strong evaluator would involve having the capability to aspire and to potentially disrupt the continuities of what life is for any social group or individual. Like choice in education policy, the notion of aspiration has been rather fatally damaged through its use in widening participation programmes where aspiration is directed only to one end – choosing higher education. Yet Appadurai (2004) argues that we need to strengthen the capability to aspire, especially among the poor. But he has in mind a 'thick' version of an aspiration capability which constitutes a resource for poor people to contest and alter the conditions of their own welfare. He argues for a deep and wide expansion of people's aspirational maps, a flexible horizon of aspirations, and having a sense of possibility of what life ought to offer. Appadurai links the capacity to aspire to voice, arguing that each accelerates and nurtures the other. Similarly, where education fosters voice, it simultaneously nurtures aspiration. As Bernstein (2000, 12) says: 'To know whose voice is speaking is the beginning of one's own voice' and one's own power. This is arguably the hardest thing pedagogically, yet fundamentally important to widening participation as widening capability.

There is evidence of working-class students gaining from higher education, much as there is evidence of the opposite as in Janet's case. The point is to understand such contradictory outcomes for individuals and also crucially for social groups. Rosie's story is illustrative. She was studying English Literature at the same Russell Group university as Janet. In interviews, she remarked on her growing autonomy, commenting that: 'I realize now how much I was an extension really of my mum and my sister and now I just feel completely separate from them and different … so I think I've got the independence and the freedom and the confidence to do different things' (interview, 20 May 2003). She was acutely aware of the class differences among her peers and teachers, saying that as soon as she heard a 'posh' accent she assumed that people were 'more intelligent than me and that they're superior to me' (interview, 17 May 2002). But, unlike Janet, she also spoke about her growing intellectual confidence in tackling essay assignments: 'having to think really really hard, what do I actually believe, and having to order my ideas … when you get in the library and all the books are there, you think, "Oh wow", I really click with the subject, it's really good, I enjoy it'. Rosie joined the student newspaper, spent a summer working in the USA, achieved an upper second-class degree, and identified journalism and writing as what she wanted to do. Within a year of graduating she was working on a regional newspaper and had written her first book.

4.   A 'promissory note'

Finally, there is room for optimism in what Habermas (1989) describes as a 'promissory note' for universities as a space for the 'lifeworld' to flourish against the colonising effects of 'system' (money and power), which distorts communicative rationality. For Habermas, universities have not departed the horizon of the lifeworld completely or left behind the moral-political liabilities of the age. Mobilising communicative reason and action in public spheres is to resist the system if we believe that higher education might or ought to offer spaces for reasoned communication in which we allow the better argument to inform our actions towards improved social life and

a more just and free future. For Habermas, scientific and scholarly learning processes are egalitarian and universalistic, sustained by the 'productive forces of discursive debate that carries with it a promissory note of the surprising argument. The doors stand open; at any moment a new viewpoint may emerge, a new idea appear' (1989, 10).

Forms of communicative rationality, rather like Deweyan fallible democratic dialogical spaces (Putnam 2007), do not prescribe a perfectionist view of the good society but rather propose, like Sen (1992, 1999), that through public reasoning, societies might reach an understanding about themselves (Habermas 1989). This has significant implications for pedagogies and equalities in higher education institutions, and it follows, for widening capability.

While sceptics might argue that Habermas probably has in mind universities more like the 'gold' universities in the UK and might be somewhat challenged to align his argument to a stratified higher education system, all the more reason to be clear on the barriers society has erected against full justice for all students, and what this means in terms of their capabilities. Moreover, Ainley (2007) has recently argued that diverse higher education institutions still have in common commitments to enable independence in learning and criticality in new generations of students, and the desire to produce rather than just reproduce knowledge. To this end he cites Newman's call for 'the knowledge of the relative disposition of things', the lack of which 'is the state of slaves and children' (quoted in Ainley 2007, 12).

Conclusion

While we need to be deeply concerned about Janet, equally we ought not to dismiss Rosie's, Narend's and Stella's narratives and in all cases we need to be aware of what these experiences tell us about structures of social class so that academic struggle is not pathologised as individualised deficits, and individual persistence and success not read off as class equality. Instead we need to understand better, account for, and try to transform the unevenness in the development of widening participation students' capabilities to become and be strong evaluators as a matter of inequality in teaching and learning. Widening participation ought then to be conceptualised as widening capability as a matter of full justice. While this would further require that universities ought to be defended as one of the remaining public spaces of reasoned argument and inclusive dialogue about important and difficult questions, so that all students are educated to be critical and active participants in democratic life, it would also require that they contribute to more just societies and the fairer distribution of knowledge, skills and the capability to be a strong evaluator.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. The Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (see http://www.tlrp.org) provides a more expansive definition: to include people from socially disadvantaged families and/or deprived geographical areas, including deprived remote, rural and coastal areas or from families that have no prior experience of higher education. For the TLRP, widening participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social background in particular higher education disciplines, modes and institutions. It can also include access and participation across the ages, extending conceptions of learning across the life-course, and in relation to family responsibilities, particularly by gender and maturity.

2. The 10 dimensions are the capability: to be alive; to live in physical security; to be healthy; to be knowledgeable, to understand and reason, and to have the skills to participate in society; to enjoy a comfortable standard of living, with independence and security; to engage in productive and valued activities; to enjoy individual, family and social life; to participate in decision-making, have a voice and influence; to be and express yourself and have self-respect; and to know you will be protected and treated fairly by the law.
3. The project involved working with 14 volunteer first-generation male and female undergraduate students over two years in 2002–2003. Each student was interviewed individually three times; they were interviewed twice in focus groups, and met twice in whole group workshops. They also acted as student researchers, collecting data from fellow students, and kept a diary of significant teaching and learning experiences over one week. See Walker (2006b). The interview data for Janet and Rosie are taken from this project.
4. The project aim was to theorise how undergraduates ought to be positively transformed as persons by their learning experiences and knowledge acquisition in discipline-based, research-rich teaching. The research was primarily conceptual, exploring how the capability approach might expand debates about the research/teaching nexus in the disciplines in new directions which pay attention to the normative purposes of higher education, frameworks of equality and social justice, and both epistemology and an ontological turn in higher education. The project included the collection of illustrative qualitative data using semi-structured interviews with nine lecturers and 21 students in three departments. See Walker (2008).

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