Author(s):Pauline Taylor (submitting/presenting)

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Contribution

Enacting A Politics Of Recognition In Higher Education: Methodologies And Challenges

There is international concern relating to access and opportunity in Higher Education, particularly for those from traditionally marginalized groups (Council of Europe, 1996; Rougaas, 2001). In Australia, the Government has recently established targets to increase the proportion of Australian 25?34-year-olds with a Bachelor degree to 40% by 2025 and the proportion of undergraduate enrolments from low-socioeconomic backgrounds to 20% by 2020 (Gillard, 2009). The drive towards equity and social cohesion in tertiary education is a clear political goal internationally (OECD, 2008, Rougaas, 2001;) with significant policy congruence across Europe, the USA and Australia (Ball, 1998).

However, longitudinal studies in the USA (Tinto, 2006-7) Australia (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) and Europe (UK) suggest that concerted government and individual institutional efforts are piecemeal or have made minimal difference to overall retention and completion rates of students from traditionally marginalized groups. Furthermore, the intent and effectiveness of these interventions have been brought into question (Osborne, 2003)This ?wicked? international problem seems resistant to focused policy interventions suggesting, as argued by Gale (2009), that a more fundamental shift is required in how tertiary institutions might be more responsive to increasing diversity.

Like Kift et al. (2010) and Krause et al. (2005), Gale (2009) focuses on the student learning environment as the site or ?glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together? (McInnis, 2001)? and consequently where issues of exclusion and embodied knowledge may best be addressed. However, unlike

these researchers, Gale advocates

a more sophisticated approach to student equity and social inclusion [that] entails the creation of space in higher education not just for new kinds of student bodies but also for their embodied knowledges and ways of knowing ? [that] has relevance for the epistemologies of all socio-cultural groups. (2009, p.14)

Higher education institutions and researchers have become increasingly interested in how and why tertiary education systems tend to reproduce privilege (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Teese, 2011). Sellar and Gale (2011) after Connell (2007) posit that real student engagement necessarily involves a shift towards ?epistemological equity? (Dei, 2008) ??from a politics of *representation* (of population groups and particular interests) to a politics of *recognition* (of knowledges and ways of knowing *in addition to* Eurocentric forms). This conceptual framework resonates strongly with a design-thinking orientation to pragmatic ways in which universities might rethink and reshape their approaches.

Taking up Sellar and Gale?s (2011) proposition, this paper analyses data collected in the development and implementation of a whole-of-institution Transition Framework for commencing students at one Australian university which used a design-thinking oriented methodological approach to try to disrupt the dominant institutional paradigms at work. In particular, attention is paid to the epistemologies and institutional policies and practices that work as powerful technologies (Ball, 2003) in maintaining a dominant culture.

Method

This paper uses a creative and innovative combination of conceptual frameworks; design thinking and the notion of epistemological equity (Dei, 2008) to analyse data collected over two years in the development and implementation of a whole of institution transition framework. Design thinking is an intellectual approach to tackling complex (wicked) problems that focuses on close observation, understanding of and empathy with, end-users (students) as a way of obtaining deep knowledge and rapid prototyping of effective solutions (Caroll et al. 2010). The processes of development of the transition framework followed design thinking processes. Data sources included quantitative institutional data as well as qualitative data from staff and student interviews and surveys.

Expected Outcomes

The analysis provides insights into how and why institutional policies, practices and epistemologies militate against the creation of more inclusive spaces and experiences for non-traditional students and proposes some ways in which institutions might tackle the issue of widening participation. It also suggests ways in which institutions might enact a politics of recognition and design more positive and productive higher education experiences for increasingly diverse students.

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Author Information

Pauline Taylor (submitting/presenting)

James Cook University

Teaching and Learning Development and Student and Academic Support

Cairns