

## Higher Education Close Up 8: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU8 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 18-20<sup>th</sup> July 2015. The theme of the conference is *Locating Social Justice in Close-Up Research in Higher Education* and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website: <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/hecu8/index.htm>

### Close-up higher education research to investigate epistemic in/justice

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Philosopher Miranda Fricker has advanced the idea of 'epistemic injustice' (2007). She argues that people-as-knowers can be epistemically wronged either by not being listened to (testimonial injustice) or by accessing the pool of available concepts and meanings in society that allows one to be a trustworthy knower (hermeneutic injustice). She has gone on to propose that 'social epistemic contribution' be listed as a basic capability, to which -as developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2013)- all humans have a right<sup>1</sup>. By social epistemic contribution Fricker means having opportunity and means to contribute on an equal basis to the stock of concepts and meanings in society (whether at work or in other socio-political activity). It could be argued that such opportunity and means is exactly what a university education should provide, but there are doubts about the whether they are equally distributed in the system. This think-piece raises the question of what counts as evidence of systemic and systematic epistemic in/justice in higher education.

In the UK, students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to attend less well-resourced, so-called 'recruiting', 'teaching' universities, which regularly rank lower in league tables than to attend the wealthier, 'selecting', 'research', high-ranking universities (e.g. Boliver, 2011). Many believe, on the basis of some evidence (e.g. see work by Gill Crozier, Diane Reay and colleagues<sup>2</sup>), that students' educational experiences and outcomes are unfairly differentiated and stratified along these hierarchical lines. Below I discuss this belief in relation to epistemic justice.

Michael Young (2008) coined the term 'powerful knowledge'. Its characteristics are: it provides reliable explanations; it is the basis for suggesting realistic alternatives; it enables acquirers to see beyond their everyday experience; it is conceptual as well as based on evidence and experience; it is open to challenge; it is acquired in specialist educational institutions, staffed by specialists; and, it is organized into domains with non-arbitrary

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8zoN6GghXk>

<sup>2</sup> Crozier and Reay, 2008; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Crozier et al, 2008; Crozier et al, 2010; Reay et al, 2009; Reay et al, 2010.

boundaries and specialist communities (ibid). This description fits the type of knowledge taught and learned at university in the inter/disciplines, so it might be said that if it is not offered to students they are subject to epistemic injustice. The question of stratified access to powerful knowledge can be examined from the perspective of both testimonial and hermeneutic in/justice.

Testimonial justice demands that we ask whether 'identity prejudices' or stereotyping are at work (Fricker, 2007, p.4). So that when students from lower-ranking universities write CVs or go to job interviews they are systematically less epistemically credible or trusted than students from higher-ranking universities. Given that Oxbridge graduates and those from a few of the higher-ranking universities pull away from other universities in the labour market (Hussain et al. 2009, Tholen et al, 2013), it is plausible to suggest that they enjoy a 'credibility excess' (Fricker, 2007, p.21). However, from the perspective of hermeneutic justice the questions are different: Do graduates who have studied the same disciplines in different universities acquire comparable knowledge-derived confidence to speak and expect to be heard in the public sphere? Are students who attend lower-ranking universities having their academic, personal, or professional aspirations curtailed by acquiring less powerful knowledge? Are working-class students systematically epistemically wronged when they attend higher-status universities? Whatever people believe, these questions require close-up research. If they are answered on the basis of either opinion or too little research, students and teachers in the lower-ranking universities will be done an injustice- either by misrecognising (in Bourdieu's term) unfair distribution of knowledge or by denigration, which is a form of testimonial injustice.

The ESRC-funded 'Quality and Inequality in First Degrees' project (RES-062-23-1438) addressed such questions<sup>3</sup>. It was framed by the concepts of sociologist Basil Bernstein (d.2000) and used largely qualitative methods to explore whether sociological knowledge was unfairly distributed in four differently ranked universities. Bernstein revealed how what counts as legitimate knowledge and how it is transmitted in formal educational settings reproduces (and can disrupt) social hierarchies by sending messages about power and control. So even though epistemic injustices are experienced and performed individually, they emanate from and refer back to social fabric. His work directs the researcher to detailed exploration of curriculum (to ask what counts as legitimate knowledge) and of pedagogical practices (which send a myriad messages about what is expected of the would-be knower). A complex, subtle patterning of epistemic in/equalities was found and no clear relationship between status of university, acquisition of knowledge and the types of capabilities being (imperfectly) formed in all departments<sup>4</sup> (McLean et al, 2013; McLean et al, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Conducted with Andrea Abbas and Paul Ashwin

<sup>4</sup> However, a study of two Law department in different status universities that used the same theoretical framework and similar methods undertaken by PhD student Hannah Ordoyno (University of Nottingham) found marked differences along academic/vocational lines, but concluded that different injustices and justices were to found in the curriculum and pedagogical framing of the two degrees (thesis not yet examined).

Key to epistemic justice in universities is the quality of teaching, an activity which I take as a 'moral-practical' rather than technical (Habermas, 1984) in that it requires collective agreements about pedagogic policies and practices that do justice to all students. On that assumption, theoretically-informed, close-up research that focuses on pedagogic discursive practices can embrace the difficult-to-establish nature of epistemic in/justice universities. This indeterminacy arises from both the inter/disciplinary specificity and the subtle and intangible processes of transmission and acquisition of knowledge (for example, since we can never have learned everything there is to know, what might be enough knowledge for epistemic justice to have been done?). Nevertheless, more studies are required to establish whether or not interpretations and understandings of knowledge are differentially available across the relations of power and privilege which characterise the higher education system. To understand the complex patterning of the exclusions and inclusions which result in not/forming the capability of social epistemic contribution perhaps we need cumulative longitudinal, theorised close-up studies of teachers teaching and students learning akin to the seminal ethnographic studies of inequalities in schooling<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Ball (Beachside Comprehensive, 1981), Sara Delamont (Inside the Secondary Classroom, 1986), David Hargreaves (Social Relations in a Secondary School, 1967), Nell Keddie (Tinker, Tailor: The myth of cultural deprivation, 1975), Colin Lacey (Hightown Grammar, 1970), Paul Willis (Learning to Labour, 1977) and Peter Woods (The Divided School 1979).

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