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Extending the boundaries of research into higher education

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In this address I will argue the case for extending boundaries of research into higher education in terms of:

- the questions it asks - including those about what Erica McWilliam calls the 'charming absurdities' of higher education
- the theoretical resources it draws on - in Alex Callinicos' evocative phrase developing 'resources of critique'
- the different disciplines across which we engage in conversation

I will demonstrate that not only do I think boundaries should be extended but that I believe that to a large extent they are being, and that the field is an exhilarating one to be working in. The aim of such work is to come to an understanding of higher education and to ask the difficult questions not simply the utilitarian ones about 'what works'. Important though that kind of question might be, we are likely to be seriously misled unless the grounds of asking are properly theorised. Research in higher education presents particular challenges because those who research the field are 'insiders'. The difficulty we face is how to make the familiar strange, to notice what is odd about our practices; including what Val Hey describes as higher education's 'perverse pleasures'. I will draw on examples from my own research to highlight the contradictions of higher education policy and to show how research can contribute to asking new questions. I conclude with some thoughts about the relationship of research knowledge to existing practices and policies, and to our capacity to imagine and develop new ones.

Introduction

In this address I want to say something about different approaches to research into higher education and to explore the theme of extending boundaries. My argument is that research into higher education should involve extending boundaries: in terms of the questions it asks - including those about what Erica McWilliam (2002) calls the 'charming absurdities' of higher education; in terms of the theoretical resources it draws on, in Alex Callinicos' (2006) evocative phrase the 'resources of critique'; and in terms of the disciplines from which we engage in conversation. I am optimistic about my argument because, as I hope this address will demonstrate, not only do I think this should happen but I believe that to a large extent it is, including work that is being done by scholars in the audience here.

The topic of my lecture is boundaries. My boundary metaphor has multiple resonances: territorial, sporting, bodily. Ideas of boundary-crossing and nomad are significant tropes in post-colonial literatures. Boundaries seek to delineate and in terms of disciplines produce their own academic tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Boundaries help to

define, but can also limit. Extending boundaries, therefore, implies pushing them back. I have used 'extending' rather than 'crossing' because that might imply leaving the territory, and although I recognise that crossing can involve being in multiple places, I want to think of research into higher education as a field, but also as a contested, noisy, and busy space.

My address falls into four main parts: in the first I hazard some general observations and ask questions about the field; the second considers the theoretical resources available to higher education researchers; the third turns to the sorts of questions we ask and takes two examples from my own research (the first on personal development planning; the second on plagiarism); and the final part returns us briefly to my starting point.

What is research into higher education?

What is research into higher education and what is distinctive about it? My definition is very broad. It covers work that can be described as being 'about' higher education and as well as work that is 'for' higher education (Malcolm & Zukas, 2002) in the narrower sense of research into improvement, whether this is understood as making things better for students, making higher education more productive, or more focused on mission, although of course all these areas are important. I want to defend a broader claim about the aim of research into higher education, which is to come to an understanding of higher education and to ask difficult questions, not simply utilitarian ones about 'what works'. Although that kind of question is important, we are likely to be seriously misled unless the grounds of asking are properly understood and theorised (Clegg, 2005a). Arguably this is already the case; the search for the holy grail of evidence-based practice has migrated inexorably from medicine, where it makes some sort of sense, into health, educational and social policy with seriously detrimental effects. The problem is, as most practitioners will tell you, some things work in some cases and not in others; so the trick is not to evaluate this and that intervention but to ask questions about what mechanisms are at work.

Before we can do that, however, we need to work out what the 'it' is, and this presents research into higher education with particular problems in moving beyond our own everyday lived common sense and dispositions. Asking any sort question involves noticing that things are odd. As insiders in our own research world, there are particular problems in even recognising what the questions might be. In his study of academic life *Homo Academicus* the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues:

The sociologist who chooses to study his own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not as the ethnologist would domesticate the exotic but .. exotiscise the domestic ..through a break with his initial relation of intimacy (Bourdieu, 1988, xi)

In other words we need to make the familiar unfamiliar and to ask questions about what is specific to the field of higher education itself. Bourdieu's domestic metaphor is telling because when women began to interrogate the 'domestic' whole new fields of feminist inquiry were opened up. Similarly Edward Said's (1985) monumental study of 'orientalism' first published in 1978 challenged our notions of the exotic; so to make our own familiar settings 'exotic' is a way to render them 'other'.

A pertinent example of this in practice is Ervin Goffman's comment, in his address to the American Sociological Association, that such public events are about:

the indulgence of self congratulation in public

The indulgence is not only the speakers, for as Goffman pointed out

'the interesting matter for all of us here (as all of us know) is not what I will come to say, but what are you doing here listening to me saying it' (Goffman, 1983, 1)

I am going to leave that hanging for you to ponder, because as Val Hey (2004) points out some of what she calls the 'perverse pleasures' of the academy are precisely about making distinctions and judgements: about how people are performing, about who is 'in' and 'out', and the frisson of academic gossip. This relates directly to Bourdieu's (1988) analysis of academia with its rites of passage, and the subtle, and not so subtle, creation and display of cultural capital, and the general 'feel for the game'.

This has taken new forms. Lisa Lucas (2006) in her book *The Research Game in Academic Life* shows how the relatively recent research game of research selectivity is widening status distinctions both between universities and also within them, often to the detriment of both students and academics. I want to suggest, therefore, that we need to question not just old ideas and hierarchies but also look critically at some of the newer practices, and newer orthodoxies; especially ones that we have become attached to. We need to be willing to draw on knowledge and disciplinary insights that are not confined to the higher education literature. In short, we should be wary of what we think we know, as Marilyn Strathern (2000) warns us in *The tyranny of transparency* metaphors of 'transparency' conceal.

However, extending boundaries is not just complexity for complexities sake. It is rather because the field of higher education itself complex, not easy to de-code, and also because its boundaries are shifting. I am suggesting that we need: the historian's grasp of the histories and formation of higher education so that we do not mistake the systems we have now as always existing, and so as not to confuse idealised notions of some mythical past as necessarily rooted in anything more than our desires to preserve an imagined status quo; genealogies of discipline formation to help us think about what the subject higher education might be, and we might want to engage in playful deconstruction and point to what Erica McWilliam (2002) has called the charming (and not so charming) absurdities of higher education practice. We need analyses of gender and other powerful sources of inequality including class, and an ability to re-recognise the radical shock for example Simone de Beauvoir's (1997) speaking in a universal voice from the stance of 'I am a woman' which resonates down the decades since 1949 when she wrote *The Second Sex* (see Clegg, 2006); and the linguists attention to detail of the tropes and metaphors found in strategy documents and policy papers (including, and perhaps even more so, the ones we write ourselves). So in answer to the question 'what is research into higher education?' my answer would encompass all the above and more, and an ability to 'think otherwise' (Holmes & Grant, 2007). My answer also implies that we need to extend our theoretical vocabularies in order to pose new questions.

Theoretical resources

The next question I am going to consider is what are the theoretical resources available to us? Research into higher education emerged, not surprisingly out of a concern with the learning experiences of students. A dominant tradition of research evolved which has become known as the 'approaches to study' literature. It focuses on students' intentions to learn and conceptions such as deep and surface learning by starting from a qualitative

phenomenographic approach. The approach has been so influential that Mike Prosser and Keith Trigwell are able to claim that:

The combination of evidence that, on the one hand, a deep approach to learning is desirable and a surface approach is less desirable, and on the other hand, the learning context (and in some cases student perceptions) can be changed by university teachers and administrators to afford one or other approach, forms the basis of a powerful tool to improve the quality of students' learning. (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999, p. 98)

And, even more simply, Noel Entwistle (2001, p. 593) to state that:

Increasingly, this research is indicating ways of improving teaching in higher education in ways which directly affect the quality of student learning.

It also inspired phenomenographic enquiries in to other aspects of higher education and proved immensely popular with practitioners. In terms of its theoretical resources, however, this approach is limited in the numbers of question it asks and it has recently, and in my view rightly, been criticised by scholars including Kay Greasley and Peter Ashworth (2007) for the methodological and philosophical assumptions it makes (see also Ashwin & McLean 2004; Haggis, 2003). Crucially, from my perspective the focus on conceptions of learning and teaching neglects all the broader social questions we might want to ask of higher education and higher education systems.

These systems are constantly in flux and reshape what it means to be an academic and the nature of studentship itself. Numerous writers (including Barnett, 2003) have pointed to the ways in which the idea of studentship is being subtly transformed from one who studied texts, studentship in a discipline, to the idea of studentship as 'autonomous/self-directed/flexible lifelong learners' (Edwards & Usher, 2000, 55).

Indeed, the whole policy discourse of higher education is now encapsulated in terms like 'employability', or in the Australasian context 'graduate attributes'. These configurations shift what counts as knowledge and how it is judged. Indeed, they are 'changing the subject' of higher education (McWilliam, 2004). As Erica McWilliam, wickedly notes, rather than academics having a relationship to their own work or with students, what increasingly counts is 'the degree of intimacy that academics have with the record' (McWilliam, 2004, 159).

Understanding these sorts of trends makes the question of the resources for theorising even more compelling. Much excellent critical work in higher education has come from within post-structuralism. This is unsurprising given the general prominence of post-structuralism in the social sciences and humanities. It is also because of the analytical power poststructuralism affords involving the analysis of discourse not just as language but as practices; what Alex Callinicos (1989) calls 'worldly' post-structuralism to distinguish it from its more textual varieties. Using these resources we can begin to see how we as 'subjects' are called into being: as students, as academics, and as new managers through the practices of quality assurance, audit, and other practices of surveillance. Fascinating questions have been asked, for example, by Catherine Manathunga (2006) using post-colonial theory about the practices of academic development, its unhomeliness, and the othering of academics.

Any of you who are familiar with my more theoretical writing will know, however, I think this only takes us so far. Poststructuralism cannot adequately address issues of human agency because it wants to deconstruct the whole notion of agency and show it to be a false problem; emphasising the unfixity of subjects and the ongoing processes of the constitution of the 'self'. In contrast, I have been drawn to the work of Margaret Archer (2000) who in her

lovely phrase explores the 'enchantment of being human'. In my view, she provides a much richer account of what it means to be human and how our powers of action are constituted through a multi-dimensional view of persons and society, and their necessary relations with the natural world (see Clegg 2006). We also need to be able to understand the mechanisms at work in the social world, which are not visible or reducible to the 'really real' of experience. So my own work stands in opposition to empiricism, which reduces what we know simply to experience, as well as being critical of post-structuralism.

This does not mean we have not much to learn from scholars working in other traditions, but it does mean that theory matters. The detail of all this is not the stuff of keynotes, but what I want to emphasise is that I think theory is important for understanding. Moreover, I am heartened by the increased willingness of higher education researchers to enquire into the fundamentals of the ways they theorise. Two recent examples can be found in Monica McLean's (2006) work on Habermas, and Stephen Rowland's (2006) work drawing on Spinoza. These issues may seem 'academic' but after all this is, in part, what we are for (Clegg, 2007)

The questions we ask

I now want to turn to the sorts of questions we ask. I want to take a couple of examples to show how in my own work I have taken seemingly 'mundane' (Clegg, 2005b) and ordinary practices in higher education and asked both theoretical and empirical questions about them. My local examples have some characteristics specific to the UK, but the overall theoretical argument and the tendencies they describe, I would suggest, do not. I also want to suggest that research into higher education has a productive, but not linear, relationship to practice.

I have consciously chosen examples of things that are close to our hearts as higher education practitioners; examples of concerns whose impulse comes as much from radical educators as from the policy arena. Although I (like many others) have analysed what might seem perverse developments in higher education such as managerialism (Clegg & McAuley, 2005), what I am increasingly interested in are the contradictions within what seem like progressive moves and in the ways some 'problems' come to dominate our agendas and not others.

The first example I'm going to use is what is known as personal development planning, which attempts to improve learning for students by helping them reflect.

And the second concerns threats to academic integrity in the form of plagiarism, a subject which touches on values close to the heart of most educators.

Personal development planning

My first example is personal development planning (self regulation in the North American literature) which covers a range of practices whereby we ask students to think about what they are doing, to analyse and reflect, and then to plan future actions in order to improve their learning. There is a level at which this seems so obviously a good and sensible thing that it hardly merits attention. I was, however, intrigued for a number of reasons. Firstly, because in the UK it is being implemented across the whole sector, the only pedagogical technology which is mandated by the Quality Assurance Agency (Clegg, 2004, Clegg & Bradley 2006b). Secondly, because it has attracted a flurry of interest around the question of 'what works' leading to the commissioning of the first 'systematic review' of the literature in the higher education field (Clegg, 2005a). And thirdly, because in my work with staff in different disciplinary areas I was very aware how difficult reflection is and that, moreover, people

'fake it' retrospectively writing up what look like reflections, often the very day before they are required to submit them (Clegg & Bufton, 2007). So the impetus was policy orientated, research orientated, and practice based.

When I first started thinking about personal development planning (Clegg, 2004) I rapidly realised it was what Marx describes as a 'chaotic conception' in other words although it seems like a simple unitary thing, it is in fact a complex and analytically incoherent amalgam. Utilising the simple device of analysing the 'Guides for Busy Academics' published by the then Learning and Teaching Subject Network Generic Centre (short 'how to do it' summaries written by enthusiasts)

it became apparent from them that personal development planning could cover anything from dissertation preparation, work on CVs, the development of meta-cognitive competency, reflection in numerous guises and so on, the list is extensive.

Now of course, if one is a practitioner this all makes perfect sense. The repertoire of strategies one might use to engage students is likely to vary by discipline and orientation (Clegg & Bradley, 2006a). As an object of research about 'what works' this lack of conceptual clarity and precision leaves a lot to be desired. Put simply, in the case of personal development planning starting with the concrete deceptively simple question, does 'it' work, is unlikely to be amenable to sensible analysis, because we don't know what the 'it' is.

So what happened when researchers started to look for evidence? Systematic review forms a major plank in the evidence-based practice armoury and is designed to give practitioners authoritative, comprehensive, and up-to-date summaries of findings in the field. It is a way of reviewing the research literature that aims for comprehensiveness following a strict protocol. The papers are then sifted on the basis of 'quality', most usually using quality criteria that involve an approximation of the medical 'gold standard' of randomised controlled trials. In the case of the personal development planning systematic review this translated as studies involving 'researcher-manipulated interventions' and 'independent outcome measures'. The review was certainly comprehensive - over 14,000 references were located. Out of this huge list only 25 studies met the 'quality' threshold. Unsurprisingly, given the different research traditions, most of the studies originated in North America with only one from the UK. The authors concluded that personal development planning has positive effects on student learning, student attainment, and approaches to learning. They also concluded, however, that it was not possible to know 'how or why' personal development planning was producing those effects reported. Practitioners, of course, want to know how and why, because without insights into what is working, they are left simply with a list of interventions that are unlikely to be replicable in their context, and may, or may not, produce positive results. Despite the procedural rigour of the review process the review tells us very little that is useful to practitioners, and offers no theoretical insight into the mechanisms producing the results. We do not know whether the reported outcomes were produced by the same or different mechanisms, or even if the term reflection is being used with any consistency, and given cultural variations it appears extremely unlikely that this is the case.

The systematic review and the evidence-based movement can also be criticised on other grounds. It subtly repositions the practitioner from someone who is an expert, to someone who is on the receiving end of findings which are 'disseminated' to them. As Maggie MacLure has argued the whole process of searching and sifting seems to guarantee not reading the papers themselves. She argues this approach:

is just one part .. of a pervasive attempt to reconfigure and regulate professional and academic identities The intellectual, social and political implications of this are

malign. If the project of disabling critique and disciplining academic work succeeds, the outcome is likely to be a diminution in the social usefulness of research knowledge, the continuing oversimplification of educational problems and solutions, and a less well-educated, less critical community of researchers. (MacLure, 2005, p. 408)

In other words, it deskills researchers and practitioners alike.

It also acts as a sort of smoke screen. The idea that if the review had found no evidence then the Quality Assurance Agency would have withdrawn its policy seems unlikely in the extreme. Patti Lather (2003) has pointed out that the use of research after the event to bolster policy decisions is becoming widespread. One does not need to confine oneself to higher education to think of much more scary examples from the political arena.

In contrast, my own research with my colleagues, Sally Bradley and Serena Bufton, took a rather different tack enquiring into how staff and how students understood personal development planning and looking at what they thought produced effects. This research produced a much more nuanced account of disciplinary orientations and practice. It showed, not surprisingly, that where practitioners had well understood models that stemmed from their own practice, for example in social work and education, then personal development planning as a pedagogy was embedded and successful.

However, where it was not consonant with the values of the discipline or the profession, there were tensions (Clegg & Bradley, 2006 a&b). This was not just a question of personal orientation or disciplinary preference.

Personal development planning has increasingly become associated with utilitarian notions of employability. The discourse of employability shifts ideas about purpose of higher education with a focus on producing flexible individuals for the labour market (Clegg, 2007). This is not to say that employment is not a legitimate goal in participation in higher education, but it is to note the way policy can reposition what goes on in higher education. Personal development and reflection has moved from domains where it was well understood, embedded and under the control of knowledgeable practitioners, to one where everyone has to be able to demonstrate its place in the curriculum.

This shift is part of the general issue of a greater internalisation of the audit culture; McWilliam's (2004) familiarity with the 'record'. Being able to record and show where something has taken place, rather than seeing it as something that might appropriately be embedded as part of the pedagogy.

Of course, this insistence on demonstrating might have advantages for students and 'make' (and I use the verb advisedly) staff aware of what they are doing, but we should pause to also ask what might be lost. An educational practice 'reflection' with roots in all sorts of progressive educational ideas, many of which I would entirely endorse, changes its meaning by becoming the subject of an external and regulatory gaze. Personal development comes to be associated with the production of individualised market orientated, flexible subjects of employability, and with the idea of individualisation as 'a fate not a choice' Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). As higher educators we are being invited to produce good neo-liberal subjects.

The dangers of inauthenticity in all this are evident. Reflection has become something that we all have to do, what Kathryn Eccelstone (1996) described as a mantra. Unsurprisingly students in our research, as well as staff, described the process of 'faking it'; producing

something that looks like reflection on demand, usually just before a tutorial or hand-in date, and producing some pretty awful writing in the process. Students' accounts also made us reflect on how time is experienced and gave us insight into why students 'fake it' rather than reflect and plan (Clegg & Bufton, 2007). The past and future are always experienced in the present, and the younger students describe their first year as being lived intensely in the present (as any parent or teacher can tell you). Most did not experience their present in terms of the future, so planning was a very problematic activity for them. It was only when the panic started, sometimes in the second year and even more worryingly in their third, and when the future present of actually graduating started to implode into consciousness that they retrospectively recognised that planning might have been a good idea.

So what began as my mundane subject 'personal development planning' sent me on an excursion into: theoretical deconstruction; a critique of evidence-based policy; a meditation on time and has latterly with Miriam David (Clegg & David, 2006) returned me to thinking about different meanings of the 'personal' and especially the politics of the personal in feminism.

This work does not speak directly back to practice at either pedagogical or the policy level, but it can be used as part of the meaning making against which sensible policy making might occur. In recognising diversity and in resisting unitary interpretations, it is also an invitation for us as practitioners to think about the meanings of time for students and the ways it might be different from ours. It is a mistake to think that research is the same stuff as practice and we should expect its forms to be different. Concrete sciences such as education involve retroduction from experience, from the feel and practical wisdom of doing, and practice rightly can not just rely on research (Clegg, 2005c). Indeed, one of the flaws of the idea of evidence-based is that it that it operates with crude dissemination model and assumes that, if you tell someone this is good practice (even assuming it is), they will translate it into their own context.

Plagiarism

To turn to my second example - plagiarism; plagiarism appears an 'obvious' question for higher education and one which excites universal condemnation. Plagiarism has received an extraordinary amount of media attention and appears as a carrier of all sorts of anxieties about the state of higher education. For example when we were doing the research there were 53 discrete mentions in the Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES) between May and October 2004 reflecting international as well national concerns (Clegg & Flint, 2006). It is not just the number of articles, letters, comment that suggested a 'moral panic' but the over-riding polemical tone

including Frank Furedi's intemperate 'It's the university, stupid'. Warning bells always sound in my head when work trying to understand something is accused of condoning the act (as has happened in the case of plagiarism).

It appears plagiarism touches a number of fears and has become a proxy in debates about standards and the dangers of admitting students from 'non-traditional backgrounds'. When something gets this sort of attention I want to ask what is going on and to enquire more closely into the concerns it purports to describe.

In this instance the existing research suggested that there was no simple 'thing' as plagiarism and attempts to reduce it simply to 'cheating', while having the advantage of a high moral tone, displayed little intellectual curiosity. So following in the footsteps of Peter Ashworth and his colleagues (Ashworth et al 2003) whose earlier work had looked at 'plagiarism in its

appearing' in the lifeworld of the student, I worked with Abbi Flint on making a similar move by looking at staff. This approach involves bracketing the question of the reality of the thing 'plagiarism'. We had already argued plagiarism was not a 'natural kind' an 'it' to be studied, but that like personal development planning it was another chaotic conception. A reasonably dispassionate look at the statistics shows that what is being measured varies and that, as with many social phenomena, heightened awareness and changed reporting practices will in itself produce an increase. This is not to say that some practices may not be on the increase, but we should approach claims about practices in our own domain with the same scepticism as we accord claims about crime or any other set of statistics, and be equally willing to ask why now, and in whose interests, and what else is going on here?

What constitutes originality is both culturally and historically relative, repeating authority can be a cultural value, our obsessions with originality involves what Peter Ashworth describe as 'a certain western, modernist *epistemē*' (Ashworth et al 2003, 261). Recognising the significance universities attach to originality, integrity, and personal ownership of ideas tells us something about the modern dispositions and attitudes of academics, about what we think higher education is, and the rules of its game. This is by no means as simple and unitary as one might think. Once we started to explore the meaning of plagiarism we found, both from the existing literature and in our own work, that academics do not have common views about what counts as plagiarism. Our own research revealed that that while there were differing views of plagiarism it seemed to go to the heart of the personal project or 'care' of many academics, and that dealing with it was described as an extraordinarily painful and emotional experience. This partially helps explain why the subject of plagiarism produces such heated debate, and it also sheds light on the attempts to close down the debate. The issue of 'plagiarism' does not simply reduce to better policies and assessment practices. It strikes at the heart of ways people feel about their life care what Stephen Rowland (2006) describes as academic love for the discipline and the truthfulness of ideas. This all sounds rather messy and bodily, but my argument is that it is. Our respondents used extremely vivid bodily metaphors. I have argued in work with Colin Beard and Karen Smith (Beard et al 2007) that we should be attending to these more emotional and affective elements of the pedagogy encounter, and not just attempt to reduce phenomena to technical rational descriptions and solutions.

We might also pause to question whether there are connections with what I said about employability in the discussion of my first example. The employability agenda, in its cruder more openly utilitarian guises, presents higher education as an increasingly individualised private good. We as academics (at least in public) have been slow to contest this idea and share the idea of the virtues of academic work as a life care or project. While it would be reductionist in the extreme to suggest that students 'cheat' because they have a utilitarian attitude to knowing, Peter Ashworth's work does suggest that when students cannot see the relevance or intrinsic value of a thing they are less likely to regard plagiarism as wrong. This suggests that in our work with students we need to be more willing to talk about the values underpinning our work. This is not a simple fix, but it is a challenge to think more closely about what we take academic integrity to mean and how we might find a meaningful language to speak about it both to policy makers and within our own communities. There is work, for example by Jon Nixon (2004), which does this and articulates a new sense of purpose for higher education. To discuss that, however, would take me into further speculation about what higher education is for (see Clegg, 2007).

Both my examples show how I have roamed theoretically and, indeed rather messily, around. I have asked different questions in trying to grasp the subject, and in exploring the contractions of both policy and practice. I cannot pretend to either total theoretical coherence or that it was all planned in advance, indeed were I to do a critical reading of my own work I would spot the slippages and gaps even more quickly than others. So what might this suggest about the about the pitfalls as well as the strengths of my original argument for extending boundaries of research into higher education?

Extending Boundaries?

Finally, I want to return to my original arguments about extending boundaries, which might be roughly translated as tolerating messiness while trying to reach some conceptual clarity. It also includes being bold enough to imagine different futures for higher education, because by holding that as a possibility we can ask new questions. My original premise was 3 fold: in terms of the questions higher education research asks, in terms of the theoretical resources it draws on, and in terms of the disciplines from which we engage in conversation. I hope I've demonstrated that there are many, and to mind interesting, questions to be asked especially about policies and practices that appear mundane and ordinary. In the case of both personal development planning and plagiarism my questions ranged about in what might seem unruly ways. But they were always grounded in an attempt to locate them theoretically and to enquire in to the nature of the phenomena under scrutiny; a willingness to ask questions about things that I valued such as reflection and things that made me anxious, like most academics, such as plagiarism. I also wanted to attend to the different levels of argument that occurred in the process of the research. To wonder, for example, about how personal development planning relates to broader governmental policy in terms of employability and discourses of the flexible worker in neo-liberal regimes; the notion of individualisation as a fate not a choice; and by implication how we might challenge reductionist accounts and tell different stories about the meanings and promise of higher education. My work also challenged ideas about what planning means in the lifeworld of the individual student and is an invitation to be more curious and open to their life projects as well as being willing to articulate our own.

All this bring me to what might appear as my shocking intellectual promiscuity, drawing on insights from other disciplines and traditions. While, I would absolutely defend my own underlying philosophical commitments I have learned enormously from work in different traditions and I am committed to what I believe are the necessary deconstructive, phenomenological and hermeneutic moments in doing research. I am also committed to learning from the insights of different disciplinary traditions. My own work has benefited enormously from collaboration with Karen Smith, whose careful attention to linguistic form and rhetoric has deepened my understanding of the resources available for critical reading (Clegg& Smith, 2007). I have defended thinking about theoretical questions because they are an indispensable resource for critique. My work on critical realism is based on a commitment to understanding and explanation, but also involves a commitment to a view of human agency that means that critique is not just intellectual but is also grounded in our human capacities to act. It is, therefore, hopeful in terms our capacities to change the world at both the micro political level of the institution, but also more broadly in terms of imagining different futures and outcomes.

However, this is not vain glorious. Val Hey describing academics' commitments to this and that theory notes:

how often their own cherished analytical rationality is broken up by glimpses into the imagination of more provocative thinkers. I have come to the conclusion that it is not so much that we self-consciously assemble all the resources for the making of research imaginaries as those vivid ideas (and frequently their authors) come to haunt us. (Hey, 2006, p. 439)

So I have multiple hauntings and associated intellectual vulnerabilities.

The danger of my argument for extending the boundaries of research into higher education is that it risks collapsing into a sort of grab-all theoretical eclecticism. But that, in my view, is a risk worth taking. The bigger danger is that we stop asking questions that challenge us, and that we become complacent in the questions we ask about higher education. With that complacency comes the danger of accepting other people's descriptions about the purposes of higher education, and confining ourselves to research that tells us how to do things better. I don't believe we should confine ourselves to these sorts of questions, nor do I think it produces good research.

That, at its core, is why I believe we should be extending the boundaries of research into higher education.

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