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'It's a bit like giving birth'. Middle-aged women graduates talk about their experience of higher education.

Introduction

Listening to stories about their experience of higher education from the participants in research for my PhD led me to feel passionately that we needed to re-think the academy; in other words to re-imagine 'the universities we need', to borrow the title of Blake, Smith and Standish's (1998) book.

I use 're-imagining the universities we need' rather than 're-thinking the academy' deliberately here and the significance of this will become apparent in the course of the paper. For now I would say that for me the term 'university' implies a more expansive, inclusive and unbounded space than 'academy'

I am not a discourse analyst but I was brought up in a family where my first language was not that of either my parents or my two older siblings, my subjects at university were French and German and I spent thirteen years teaching these so I am always pulled towards words and language and what they mean.

So it is perhaps inevitable that the stories I heard led me to conclude that the way we talk about higher education is fundamental to a re-imagining of the university.

In addition to what my participants say about higher education my research looks at aspects of both official and common discourses about higher education, the latter two sharing certain complementarities as well as divergences.

What they have in common is that they do not resonate with the accounts of my participants.

Although the occasional chime can be heard often this is out of tune with the stories as a whole.

Background to the stories

My research focuses on the value of higher education for women 'like me' (that is white, born and raised in working class families and who graduated in the late 70s and early eighties and now in our mid-forties to early fifties).

When I say 'like me' I mean of course that there are certain things we share, certain things we have in common, certain places we meet.

But simultaneously not one of these women is 'like me'.

We all have our own stories and our own way of storying our lives as well despite the places and times where we recognise each other.

We are women who I see very much as roaming the margins.

In saying this I do not mean that we are marginalised as this would suggest a degree of disempowerment and disassociation that is not reflective of our situations.

Whilst there is little time to dwell on this point, I would in fact argue that in some respects this can be a position of strength because of the richly nuanced perspectives it affords.

What I mean by 'the margins' can be compared for example to the way in which the German speaking Swiss playwright Max Frisch was able to write about the rise of Nazi-ism in Germany itself.

And I am particularly privileged being one of the storytellers as well as the researcher.

Imagination in recollection

A re-imagining carries with it hopes for the future, the promise of things yet to happen.

It seems therefore somewhat ironic, paradoxical and perhaps contradictory to begin such a re-imagining with a rummage in the past.

I would like to leave this tension in place as a kind of 'prickle under the skin' and a reminder that temporal lines are never easily drawn.

One thing I would emphasise though, is that it is no 'recherche du temps perdu', a mourning for the loss of a golden age.

Despite this glance over our shoulders my sights are fixed on what might be possible beyond that which is immediately apparent.

Therefore I will now turn to extracts from the transcripts of the stories that were told to me by my participants which I have crafted into three/four short vignettes (depending on time).

Middle-aged women talking about higher education

Vignette number one - 'a different space of desire' (Hey 2009)

YD Why did you want to take part in this study?

Fiona Well my background is in sociology and I've done a bit of research myself and the topic is something that occurred to me so many times. Why is nobody looking at this? What has happened? I'm interested in the fact that women have not necessarily lived up to the great expectations and to what was on offer and the dream maybe doesn't work out for everybody

Sally My grandmother died a few years ago and for the last few years of her life she'd had Alzheimers. I've always felt that I was very lax in not getting more information from her before that. I feel quite sensitive about it because I think, well it's just gone because there isn't anybody else. If everybody wrote more about their own lives and left some sort of history behind them that people could latch on to I think it would make people understand each other much more and come to terms with what people sometimes have to do.

I struggled for a long time to find my 'voice' in my project.

As a participant I struggled to tell my story. At one point I told my supervisor that I felt what I had produced was a 'sanitised, I can do social research sort of a piece' rather than 'my story'.

As researcher I struggled to articulate why I thought my research was important, why I wanted to do it, what I thought needed to be said.

It was only when I began to speak to other participants that I became aware of the reasons for this and I am not exaggerating when I say that it was a liberating and revelatory experience.

For example when I wrote a proposal so that I could get funding for my research I said my aim was to 'contribute to understandings about the barriers to and benefits of participation in higher education for white working class women'.

All very laudable and it helped me to secure funding but did it fire me up? No.

And did I feel a 'passionate attachment' to it (Hey 2009)? No.

Fiona and Sally and others, those who occupy a 'different space of desire' enabled me to express what was on my mind and in my heart

So what these extracts exemplify and encapsulate for me is that the re-imagined university cannot be a place where the brain has primacy over the heart (the realm of feelings, particularly of love) or the gut (where both courage and intuition reside), or even the back bone (symbolic of courage and integrity).

It needs to be a place where none of these have primacy, where there is no space between feeling and thinking.

Here I connect with Martha Nussbaum's treatment of cognition and emotion in her (2001) book 'Upheavals of Thought'. In short, she takes a cognitive/evaluative view of emotion, arguing that emotions themselves have a narrative structure and are 'cognitively-laden' (2001:65).

This would be recognised within the universities we need.

Vignette Number Two – 'vital languages' (Hey 2009) and an 'affective lexicon' (Reay 2005)

Yvonne: Was it ever in your mind that it was very important to have a career?

Linda: No no no. It was more that if I had the degree I would get a good job and I would not be short of money. I think it was that and I would have options. I think that was the thing. That I thought to myself certainly 'this gives me choices' and I'll have more choices if I do it.

Yvonne: But you've done it nonetheless

Linda: I've done it yeah

(both laugh)

Yvonne: But more in a roundabout route with much less planning?

Linda: Very much so. It was almost like the university was the end bit not the beginning bit. It's a bit like when you think about giving birth you think about

the day of the birth and then you have the baby but you don't think beyond that. I think that was it

Yvonne: You know that's very interesting I hadn't thought of it like that before for me getting the degree ... it was actually irrelevant...

Linda: ... what I did with it (she laughs)

I agree with Beverley Skeggs (2001) that we constitute our selves as researchers through the methods we use rather than coming as a pre-formed being to the research process.

And certainly the above extract can be read as an opportunity for me to 'be' a grounded theorist and to confirm my position as a feminist researcher.

However, to do so would I believe be an example of appropriating participant stories for the display of cleverness.

I believe that what is important in this exchange is not the opportunity to categorise experience.

Indeed I agree with Sabi Redwood (2009) that this would be to do violence to the story and the storyteller

What is important here is the language used which I believe is an example of the 'vital languages' Valerie Hey (2009) argues are required if the academy is not to remain 'mono-lingual'.

Linda was married when she went to university at nineteen and had her first child shortly after graduating.

Therefore the metaphor of giving birth, not one automatically associated with higher education, is an example of the use of an 'affective lexicon', a mode of expression that is imbued with the emotions that gives rise to it and which has analytic, explanatory and interpretative power at the level of 'felt knowledge'.

Vignette number three – counternarratives and counternarrating

University or college lets you experience a rich cultural and social scene, meeting a variety of people while studying something you love. (Directgov 2008)

This sentence is taken from an Aimhigher website and is an expression of official talk about aspiration.

I first started to feel troubled by this view of the benefits of higher education whilst working as Aimhigher co-ordinator at an FE college during 2004 and 2005.

I was particularly disturbed by the way it assumes a set of common values, ignores difference and the notion of what people might have *reason* to value.

And by the suggestion that certain experiences can only be gained through acculturation in academic settings.

However, what I also found is that It is difficult to argue against such pronouncements without also seeming to say 'it's not for the likes of us'.

But in participant stories I heard trenchant way of critiquing dominant discourses without falling into this trap.

I have called this 'counternarrating' which involves not contradiction, but the telling of a parallel story.

University or college lets you experience a rich cultural and social scene, meeting a variety of people while studying something you love. (Directgov 2008)

Liz I thought that I'd be meeting lots of really interesting people that were very bright and very articulate and probably more interesting than I was and more right on than I was and all this kind of thing and actually it all seemed very kind of middle class. A bit boring. And actually very over-protected really.

Julie So all the pretty confident girls all the way through school were just like that at university. I never felt like one of university's happy people if you know what I mean. I had a good group of friends but we were very isolated. I didn't really get involved in wider things that were going on at uni. I wasn't really interested. I should have gone and worked in a bar somewhere but I was so not confident and out of my comfort zone that I didn't and I was so bored.

I include extracts from the accounts of Liz and Julie here to draw attention to the difference.

Liz tells of the disappointment of her expectations that is a more direct contradiction of the promises of the official rhetoric.

Julie's story, on the other hand, her feeling part of a group in isolation, doesn't contradict so much as tell a different, more complex story.

Her story problematises the notion that failure to capitalise on the 'rich' possibilities on offer is only or simply or primarily a direct result of personal deficiencies.

She did meet people but they were isolated together.

And her isolation was not just due to her lack of confidence but also because there was nothing to interest her there.

And a further disturbance of the assumptions underpinning official rhetoric is that this lack of confidence is culturally informed.

The reason for Julie's lack of confidence is not that she feels culturally inferior but physically so.

She had earlier told me that at school there were the 'pretty girls' and 'the geeky girls' who earnestly pursued their studies. She belonged to the latter group. Thus, even in what is arguably a setting where 'geekiness' would be thought to win out over 'prettiness' the opposite appears to be true.

Julie's story thus undermines the assumptions underpinning what official discourse would construe as aspiration and is an example of counternarrating on several levels.

University or college lets you experience a rich cultural and social scene, meeting a variety of people while studying something you love. (Directgov 2008)

Sally And I felt quite on my own in a way but that didn't bother me coz I'd been an only child till I was fourteen so I was used to being on my own you know..... but I was quite happy to go wandering off on my own and you know go to a gallery and to the V&A something like that.

Sally My partner was sixteen years older than me and had been my teacher at college.... We had some really fantastic times and it was great and he was a good teacher from that respect as well. I learned a massive amount. He had a lot of experience. He's worked with lots of people. He'd got to know a lot of writers and worked with publishers so we did have a very rich life. Never had any money but we did have a very rich life.

Sally's account is a further complex and multi-layered example of counternarrating. She too speaks of a rich cultural scene, echoing the official rhetoric.

But hers was outside the confines of the academy, one she was capable of accessing both and independently through and within a heterosexual relationship.

And what has also become apparent in the stories is that such relationships were often more influential for women at this historical point in time.

I want to emphasise that here is that I am not 'doing' grounded theory 'on' participants, not least because doing grounded theory on myself would mean weaving a very tangled web.

Conclusion

There is a certain degree of arrogance inherent in any answer to questions beginning with 'what is needed'.

Nevertheless it would be to display a lack of backbone such as the kind I have criticised earlier not to offer some answers.

What I am inching towards, and not quite avoiding the polemical in the process, is that how we talk about higher education must resonate and connect with embodied (and I mean this literally) lived realities, which themselves are located in wider historical, political and social contexts.

The reason I used 're-imagine the university' instead of 're-think the academy', is suggestive of this. In other words the university is a space not just of the mind but of the whole person.

In other words, what I strongly persuaded that what is needed seems not to be the *creation* of a wider academy and public spaces in which knowledge is produced but perhaps, a *willingness* to recognise that it already exists

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