

Lifelong Learning or Lifelong Listening? Transforming the Learning Experiences of Older Adults in Higher Education in Scotland through Dialogue

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Abstract: *This paper proposes that theorising about widening participation pedagogic practice in relation to older adults can be significantly developed by integrating insights from critical educational gerontology and academic literacies perspectives. We examine the possibilities of this theoretical development by drawing on two exploratory research projects with 20 older students in a Scottish university, proposing dialogue can act as a catalyst for making the opaque, transparent and learning experiences, transformative.*

All Things to All People: Contested Discourse on Lifelong Learning

Alexiadou (2002) highlights that neo-liberalism has underpinned educational, as well as wider public sector policies, for the last 25 years. Grace (2009:28) proposes that in the face of the neo-liberalist logic, 'contemporary lifelong learning has been more economic than socially orientated in its intentions'. As Munck (2003: 495) contends, within the ideology of neo-liberalism, the central philosophy claims 'there is no alternative'.

The dominance of neo-liberal ideology has influenced adult education generally in a Scottish context, as reflected in lifelong learning (LLL) policy and in HE particularly, in widening participation policy and practice. Field (2000:10) is critical of such policy where it defines LLL as primarily a source of competitive advantage, dominated solely by economic and vocational concerns, focusing exclusively on workplace learning and thus 'marred by narrow vocationalism'. In the specific context of HE, Gallacher (2006) points out that the driving force for widening participation policy has been the contribution of education to economic development. Policy therefore emphasises vocational learning, whose uptake is directed specifically at those aged 18-30. Reflecting this, the UK government has a target of 50% of all 18-30 year olds to enter HE by 2010 (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). The unnecessary prioritisation of this age group over older adults is further highlighted by Davey (2002) who argues that the view of education, as only for those aged under 25 years old, is deeply entrenched in government policy and public perception. In short, HE adopts a front ended model which favours provision of educational opportunity for younger learners who have recent and contemporary educational experience.

We work in an institution which is subject to these constraints. We experience this in our day to day work where the complex processes of academic engagement can be reduced to the simple acquisition of basic study skills and educational processes are viewed as series of transactions between providers and consumers (Roberts 1999). Our response and pedagogic approach is to challenge these constraints by creating transformative learning opportunities for older and so-called non-traditional learners who are primarily engaged in vocational programmes, which in neo-liberal terms are, but do not have to be, narrowly defined. We envisage this happening through critical dialogue, a central tenet of critical educational

gerontology (CEG) (older adult education) and an academic literacies (AL) approach to academic development and engagement.

Theoretical Framework: Congruence

To reconceptualise and expand the understanding of LLL and widening participation there is a need to,

... highlight the significance of the broad range of learning processes and practices that occur in the lives of adults so as to show there is more to learning than what is acknowledged in the economic definitions of lifelong learning...[in which education becomes a commodity, a 'thing' for consumption]...(Tedder and Biesta 2009: 75).

Premised on this, we propose that, despite this commodification of education, a pathway towards transformative learning for our students may be negotiated by using CEG and AL perspectives. Widening participation theory may be developed further by explicit incorporation of the central tenets shared by these perspectives. They can provide analytical frameworks which enable critical scrutiny of the impact of political-economic and socio-cultural factors associated with class, ethnicity and gender, and how these shape differential access to, and learning experiences in, education. Both are also concerned with how the learning experiences of under-represented learners can be transformative and empowering, and thus achieve greater educational equality.

CEG draws on critical social gerontology and the feminist, political economic and humanistic discourses which it encompasses (Phillipson 2000). From the analyses this affords, CEG should inform educational providers on how they can lead older adults to higher levels of empowerment and emancipation (Formosa 2002). As such, CEG represents a way to include more critical discourses and attain a fuller understanding of the nature and purpose of older adult education (Glendenning 2000, Formosa 2002, Findsen 2005). It is primarily concerned with the transformatory and empowering possibilities of learning in later life, viewed as having a key role in re-defining how older people are located in the life course (Phillipson 2000). The following discussion therefore offers a brief critical overview of how and why this emancipatory intent (Formosa 2002) has emerged as a centrally defining aspect of CEG. A significant influence on educational gerontology has been the field of social gerontology and its adoption of critical perspectives (Withnall 2000).

In broad terms, social gerontology has been concerned with how older people live in a changing social world (Findsen 2005). In its development, educational gerontology has embraced a multi-disciplinary approach, in which social gerontology has played an important role (Glendenning 2001). Social gerontology's concerns with notions of active and successful ageing permeate educational policy rhetoric. An example of this may be seen in the policy of the European Commission which identifies key elements of active ageing for an individual, namely: working longer; retiring later; being active after retirement; engaging in health sustaining activities and being as self-reliant and as involved as possible (European Union 1999, cited in Davey 2002). Successful ageing also relates to health, but emphasises personal well-being, autonomy and psychological adjustment, while positive ageing aims to challenge negative perceptions of ageing and retirement.

In Scotland, educational objectives are shaped by these notions and are established within government strategy. The Scottish Executive (2007) has recently launched a strategic plan 'All our futures: Planning for a Scotland with an ageing population'. This promotes a shared vision

with several key outcomes based on the principle of 'active ageing [which] is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security to enhance quality of life as people age' (World Health Organisation 2002 cited in Scottish Executive 2007). Learning and education are seen as important factors in facilitating active ageing, where, 'We will explore, within current reviews of Further and Higher Education, ways in which more older people could have an opportunity to participate in learning later in life.' (Scottish Executive, 2007: 105).

Critical social gerontologists have vigorously contested notions of active and particularly, successful ageing (Holstein and Minkler 2007). These challenges come amidst calls for more critically orientated gerontology which creates new discourses that unsettle and re-imagine narrowly framed, dominant understandings of older age (Estes et al. 2003). Socially constructed negative stereotypes of ageing, caught up in a nexus of narratives in which cognitive and physical decline, loss and dependency characterise older age, have been challenged. This has resulted for calls for increased agency in later life (Tulle 2004). On successful ageing, Holstein and Minkler (2007) contend that there are inherent problems in the model where success in ageing is based on low risk of disease and disability, maintaining physical and mental health and active engagement in life. It is based on universal norms and the faulty assumption that equal opportunity exists, through which these elements of success can be attained. Consequently they believe the model fails to account for particular life trajectories and diverse socio-economic circumstances. In short, notions such as successful and active ageing are fundamental weaknesses of social gerontology (Holstein and Minkler 2007). Successful ageing in particular is overly simplified, superficially focusing on health disparities, while ignoring the underlying reasons for them. This critique accords with Estes et al (2003), who observed that, gerontology describes the activities and lifestyles of older people, rather than critically examining links between ageing and the social, economic and political structure.

Reinforcing such criticisms in the context of understanding education for older adults, Findsen (2005: 21) argues that the emphasis of conventional educational gerontology on successful ageing presents an inaccurate view of a 'golden future' for all, which in reality is unattainable for older adults whose social and material conditions vary greatly. A focus on the concept of successful ageing alone may be limited. The normative standards it imposes, in combination with neglect of the impact of the social, economic and political structure, indicate the need for a more holistic framework through which their participation may be understood. Consequently CEG may be seen to have greater explanatory power, providing insights into older adults' educational aspirations and learning experiences that are not divorced from their social, cultural, political and economic circumstances (Findsen 2005). In short, CEG presents an altogether more complex picture of the nature and purpose of older adult education, than that suggested by conventional educational gerontology. Viewing older adults through a CEG lens highlights the need for an educational site which, supports and can address the more complex and multi-faceted learning needs and experiences which have been influenced and shaped by multiple contexts. CEG identifies pedagogic practice for older learners as critical gerogogy, 'a liberating and transforming notion which endorses principles of collectivity and dialogue as central to learning and teaching' (Battersby 1987:7). An academic literacies perspective positions such dialogical practice as central in recognising the pre-eminence of collaboration and negotiation in teaching academic writing specifically, and assisting academic development generally (Lillis 2001).

The Development of the Academic Literacies Approach

Three strands of research into areas of academic concern, located mainly in the 1990s, led to the development of the academic literacies framework, and the subsequent application of an academic literacies approach towards student writing, academic engagement and development in Higher Education (HE). The first came about as a consequence of the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1997) and the social practices approach this body of work recommended. This research uncovered the complexities of literacies practices in general, and of academic literacies in particular, in terms of “the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power” (Lea and Street, 1998: 159). The second strand arose from the problems, perceived or real, associated with issues of widening access and the presence of large populations of so-called non-traditional students, in universities (Jones et al, 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000); ‘mature students’ fell into the ‘non traditional’ category (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). These older adult learners brought with them the necessity for Higher Education institutions to engage with the so-called lifelong learning agenda (Haggis, 2003; Ivanic & Lea, 2006). The third strand came from the growth of ‘professional education’ in universities, where students who had previously been engaged in vocational non-graduate courses leading to professional qualifications, for example in the fields of nursing and social work, became part of the Higher Education landscape in the UK (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000). The convergence of these three strands has resulted in the development of a new perspective on the problems students encounter in meeting the literacy demands in contemporary Higher Education; the academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001, 2006).

The problems that these new cohorts of students brought with them found a focus in the widely held perception that they could not write (Lea & Street, 1998). The traditional method of treating these problems was to locate the difficulty with the student and to adopt a ‘study skills’ approach towards rectifying the problem. This approach made three important assumptions, firstly that ‘traditional’ students could write, secondly that an inability to meet the requirements of academic writing was simply a deficit in the student and thirdly, that a generic model of academic writing, consisting of rules of grammar, spelling, language and structures, exists and can be taught. The academic literacies approach challenges all three assumptions (Lea & Street, 1998; Jones et al, 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006).

One answer proposed to this ‘problem’ was the academic socialisation model. Again, important assumptions are made by this model and are, in turn, challenged by the academic literacies approach. The first of these is that ‘the academy is a relatively homogeneous culture, whose norms and practices simply have to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution’ (Lea & Street, 1998: 159). The second is that student writing is a relatively straightforward, transparent and objective activity that may stand alone and that does not reflect ‘literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning’ (Lea & Street, 1998: 159). This has particular resonance with Mann’s (2001, 2008) analyses. She speculates on different ways of understanding the student’s alienated experience. The analogy of alienation arises out of being a stranger in a foreign land. This is particularly apposite for students we encounter, whereby they are estranged in a new land and have to learn the opaque language of rational, abstracting, academic discourse and processes (Mann 2001, 2008).

An academic literacies approach rejects the deficit model of the study skills perspective and challenges the validity of the concepts that underpin the academic socialisation approach. In many respects, although most of the research studies and literature do recognise some virtue in

the motivation behind these perspectives, it was the very failure of these models to deal with the problems of student writing in Higher Education that led to the academic literacies research. These studies revisited the need to engage with the contentious area of student academic writing and development in a more creative, effective and critical way. Premised on this, theoretically our approach to this development is informed by the example of hooks (1994) and her adoption of a 'complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives' (p10), as a means of creating a powerful, critically engaged standpoint from which to work.

Essentially, the academic literacies approach sees the core of the problem lying in three distinct areas, all of which are concerned with the contested issue of 'meaning-making' in academic writing. The first and second areas concern the dissonance between faculty expectations and student interpretations of what academic writing involves, and what it should actually consist of. The third area examines the impact of the unequal power relationship that exists between the student and the authority of the university and the staff who represent it; the university has the power to require the student to represent meaning in a way that academia recognises and within the framework that the institution has developed (Lea & Street, 1998; Jones et al, 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Ivanic & Lea, 2006). Lillis (2001) concept of essayist literacy practice as privileging certain groups fits into this construction of the unequal power relationship. Lea and Street (1998) raise the issue in terms of the types of tasks students are set.

The academic literacies approach frames its discussion around accounts which can provide 'evidence for differences between staff and students' understanding of the writing process at levels of epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge rather than at the level of technical skills, surface linguistic competence or cultural assimilation' (Lea & Street, 1998:160). In other words, the academic literacies approach questions the basis upon which academic staff critique student writing and therefore measure academic achievement, development and success. Tutors may frame their criticism and feedback in terms of 'poor structure', 'inadequate referencing', 'plagiarism' and/or 'too descriptive and not analytical enough', and describe their students as 'simply unable to write' or 'academic under-achievers'. However, in brief, what they are really suggesting is that their students do not see the world through the same lens as they do, nor do they frame meaning within the same context nor with the same language.

While CEG creates insight into the complex obstacles faced by older adult learners in HE, an academic literacies approach seeks to confront these issues by making the requirements of academic writing and progress within different disciplines very explicit by encouraging a dialogical approach and by deconstructing 'questions' to make their meaning and 'answer' demands very explicit. There is a significant body of literature, within the academic literacies framework, that supports these observations (Lea & Street, 1998; Jones et al, 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Ivanic & Lea, 2006). It proposes that although university teachers may frame their critique of student academic writing and consequent progress around what they see as structural, linguistic or technical transgressions, they are often really criticising the ways in which their students use writing to construct and frame meaning. This conflict can only be resolved when it is recognised, challenged and made transparent through informed and ongoing 'dialogues of participation' (Lillis 2001).

Implications for HE in Scotland: Real Widening Participation

We would argue that exploration of this congruence between CEG and AL frameworks is theoretically rich. The potentially powerful outcomes this congruence suggests for pedagogic practices with older and/or non-traditional students may present a solution which can overcome the obstacles implicit in narrowly conceptualised lifelong learning agendas. We suggest that older adults should no longer be put in the position of having to simply listen, but should be entitled, invited, encouraged and ultimately required to participate in a learning dialogue. This could overturn the negative impact of formative educational experiences, predominantly characterised by severely limited choice and opportunity. Even more than this, it may open doors previously closed in academia to older adults and non-traditional students. The voices of our students testify to the need for these contradictions to be understood and addressed at the levels of theory and practice.

The need to critically listen to and recognise the value of experience...

...I was actually a well qualified health visitor working in a crucial area of the NHS and well regarded by my colleagues and managers. I brought that experience to my post-registration course thinking that it would be more than enough to get me started...I was wrong...when it came to the essay I felt as though they said 'Aye, well that's fine, you know what you're doing in your job, but now that you're at university we want you to write about it in French!'

[Male post-registration nursing student – 46 years old]

The need to open the closed doors of academia

'It was the language of the essay... Yeah because I found it so difficult to understand, even the essay questions that they give you, which they describe in a way that is not everyday English, and most of the students go, "I wish they would explain this..." I understand that you need to use certain words because they refer to a concept or an idea that is supposed to be shorthanded by using that word, but the terminology, if you like, has the opposite effect of actually being a barrier to you.'

[Female senior theatre nurse – 52 years old]

The need to eliminate the imprint of negative formative educational experiences...

It didn't occur to me at all to get any kind of education... I regarded my formal education as having stopped at primary school...I just worked for 10 years in various factories and shops...

[Male postgraduate Social Work student - 59 years old]

...and more to the transformative power of dialogue .

I can see deeper into things, I understand even just how we came to be where we are. I've got opinions now and sometimes my opinions are better than his [husband]. Whereas before I didn't have opinions. If I did have opinions I couldn't back them up. So it gives you the confidence to argue and another thing you don't really argue to win as when you come to university you have multi ideas and you can argue without falling out with folk. I think university is good at teaching you that, well, there is an alternative view.

[Part-time undergraduate Social Sciences student - 58 years old]

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