The academic divide and curriculum practice in Australian Higher Education: a counternarrative

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Abstract

Why is it that despite a range of access programs, students from some social groups succeed, while those from other groups quite systematically do not? Does this reflect the meritocratic filtering role of universities as claimed by conventional wisdom?

In this paper, I respond to these issues by questioning the conventional 'wisdom' about disadvantage and equity, an area much neglected and under-theorised in higher education. Firstly, I make visible the curricular practices that systemically privilege and disprivilege certain social groups. Secondly, I expose the limitations of the dominant distributive justice approach to equity. Such questioning is timely because a decade and a half of equity policy and practices have failed to improve the systemic outcomes of indigenous and working class undergraduate students, especially if they live in geographically remote areas.

Refocusing the equity conversation

Despite the massification of higher education and a decade and a half of an equity policy under the banner of 'A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach' (DEET, 1990), educational outcomes are neither fairer for, nor more within reach of, indigenous and working class peoples. Members from these two social groups, and especially if they come from remote areas, are basically as underrepresented in undergraduate university courses now as they were at the launch of this policy in 1990. Some may argue this is due to inadequate funding of compensatory programs, or point to the meritocratic filtering out of the incompetent. My counterproposal is that the distributive equity paradigm actually works against working class and indigenous peoples in their pursuit of educational equity at a social group, rather than individual, level. It does so in two ways. First, it frames equity narrowly by conceiving of inequitable educational outcomes as academic underpreparedness and its resolution in terms of access. Second, by doing so it directs attention away from inequity as being primarily about discursive disprivileging via hegemonic curricular practices (Eijkman, 2000, 2001). Therefore, another, and arguably more productive, way of explaining and responding to educational inequity is to foreground, and make visible, the much neglected and under-theorised role of curricular practices in the way they privilege the lifeworlds; the cultural, linguistic and literacy practices of some, and consequently disprivilege the lifeworlds of others.

The argument, here sketched out in broad strokes, is that first, given the power relations at work in curricular practices, it is more appropriate to talk of disprivilege rather than disadvantage. Second, although access is necessary, it is not sufficient. Achieving structural equity, that is systemic parity of outcomes, is more likely with a new equity paradigm based on participatory justice and focused on implementing more discursively inclusive curricular practices. A participative equity paradigm aims for the reconstruction of curricular practices so that they constitute equitable social conditions and relations necessary for the equal and collective realisation of self-development and self-determination of all social groups in higher education. This alternative conceptual framework addresses the inequitable exercise of power in curricular practices and shifts the equity focus beyond access to quality of educational participation.

Being disadvantaged: A case study

If you were an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or a working class person, and especially if you live in a geographically remote region, or worse, if you are all three, then, compared to middle class urban dwellers, you would be much less likely to enrol at university, and if so you would be less likely to complete your course.

In terms of enrolment, you need to have the disposition, what Bourdieu et al. (1994) call 'habitus', to actually think you are capable 'university material' (and believe that financial arrangements provide sufficient support). Despite a 24% increase in undergraduate students since 1990, most of your peers still do not share that disposition. Working class, indigenous and geographically isolated peoples are the most under-represented of all social groups in Australian higher education (Nelson, 2002). For instance, in 2001 the enrolment rates for indigenous students had declined from their peak in 1998, and the enrolment rates for rural, isolated and low socio-economic status students in 2001 were lower than they were in 1991 (University of South Australia, 2002). Furthermore, as a low SES, mature age student, you would be part of the most under-represented group in terms of enrolment rates (NBEET Higher Education Council, 1996).

Second, being 'in' does not mean that you are equally likely to complete your course compared to your white, urban middle class counterparts. Research by Urban et al. (1999) and Martin et al. (2001) of the 1992 and 1993 university intakes respectively, confirmed that higher completion rates are primarily associated with high socio-economic status, being non-indigenous, living in an urban area, studying full-time, being young, and traditional entry on completion of Year 12. In fact, as a working class, indigenous, or geographically isolated undergraduate student, you tend to study in part-time or distance learning mode, in which you are at even greater risk of educational disengagement and thus non-completion. Distance and part-time modes of study have the highest attrition rates (Richardson, 2000; Nelson, 2002). Completion rates are also lower in arts, humanities, and social science courses, in which indigenous and working class students tend to be clustered (Postle et al. 1997).

The upshot is that despite the inception in 1990 of the 'A Fair Chance for All' equity policy, it would not make much difference if you entered in the early 1990's or early 2000's. Your chances of entering and successfully completing higher education are generally as low now as they were then (Clarke et al. 2000).

Based on the case study, this paper, as a counternarrative, proposes that educators speak of 'privileging' and 'disprivileging' and perceive equity in participative terms so as to expose the problem of educational disengagement as being located not within social groups marginalised because of social class, ethnicity, or geographic location, but rather within the power arrangements that operate through the curricular practices of higher education.

These data suggest that if we want to achieve structural equity, we need to look beyond the conventional conceptualisation of disadvantage and equity and analyse the role of class-based power in the institutionalised privileging of the lifeworlds of the most socio-economically and educationally dominant social groups. Such analyses demonstrate how the conceptual inadequacies of the dominant discourses of disadvantage and equity position subordinated social groups as academically deficient people who need access to 'scarce' social goods such as higher education, and which thereby implicitly support hegemonic curricular practices. At the same time, analyses sensitive to social class also point to the value of the discourses of privileging and participative equity. These criticalist discourses bring into focus the central role of curricular practices in systemically disprivileging the cultures, social languages, and literacy practices of indigenous and working class peoples.

Reconceptualising disadvantage and equity

The discourse of 'disadvantage' is a politicised discourse because it implies that the causes of educational inequality, and therefore the solutions to them, are located within these social groups. This discourse establishes a distinct category of 'academically deficient' students, which thereby 'normalises' access programs, mainstream students and mainstream curricular practices. Aided by the myth of meritocracy it also masks the underlying realities of power by drawing attention away from the fact that the 'disadvantaging' of subordinated social groups is due to practices designed to advantage dominant social groups. Making 'advantaging' invisible ensures that institutionalised privileging and disprivileging practices are effectively quarantined from critical scrutiny while the continued positioning of students from marginalised social groups as different and deficient reconfirms for them, their often-longstanding problematic relationship with education (Connell, 1993; 1994).

Similarly with equity, which, as a complex, value-laden term, is open to different interpretations and purposes (Rizvi, 1987; Troyna, 1995). Two broad approaches to equity can be distinguished, the distributive, and the participative. In Australia, distributive justice frames the dominant equity discourse. It is preoccupied with the equal distribution of education as a social good and therefore with the question of access. This approach also privileges a liberal conception of 'equity' in that, once access is secured, educational achievement or failure depends on individual attributes. In this way, distributive justice is committed to a meritocratic ideology and a belief in the potential capacity of individual rights to effect equity and social justice (Young, 1990; Connell, 1993). Consequently, the dominant distributive model concentrates narrowly on compensatory programs rather than on changing mainstream curricular practices. Like the discourse of disadvantage, the distributive equity discourse also lets inequitable mainstream curricular practices off the hook. Its focus on the academic inadequacies of subordinated social groups lets disprivileged students rather than institutions ‘carry the burden of responsibility for managing disjunction’ (Weil, 1989 p. 140).

In the final analysis, a distributive perspective is problematic on two counts. First, it valorises the experiences of atomised individuals in isolation from their ensemble of social relations and group identities, thereby obscuring institutional arrangements that perpetuate inequality. Second, its ideological commitment to individualism frames the equity discourse far too narrowly in terms of access to educational resources thereby ignoring the nature or the quality of the educational provision itself (Connell, 1993). Questions about educational quality, if they do arise, are disconnected from questions of equity by being positioned in "a separate theatre altogether - the theatre of curriculum theory, teaching method and the psychology of learning" (Connell, 1993 p. 18).

Because different social groups experience institutionalised curricular practices differently, a more encompassing approach to equity recognises that in addition to access, equity solutions also need to focus on 'what should be learned in education, and how'. This places the focus for change on institutional practices, and validates a participative justice based approach to equity.

Participative justice does not define equity in terms of equal or unequal treatment or equal or unequal outcomes to be resolved by way of distribution. Instead, participative justice decisively reconstructs equity in non-distributional terms by conceptualising inequity in terms of unreasonable institutional constraints on self-development and self-determination (Young, 1990). It stresses that structural inequities are generated by institutional practices when they place unreasonable constraints on the self-development and self-determination of subordinated social groups. Therefore, participative social justice addresses equity in higher education by targeting institutionalised oppression and domination in relation to both access and participation

(here defined as educational engagement). Here, distribution and participation are now positioned as two interdependent elements of equity. This directs attention to participation as educational engagement and to the social effects of curricular practices.

From a participative justice perspective therefore, equity is a condition achieved when distributive and participative measures together construct the institutional conditions necessary for the equal realisation of self-development and self-realisation by learners from all social groups. Systemic equity is achieved when there are no recurring patterns of domination or oppression in access to education and in the provision of appropriate curricular practices and therefore no significant differences in the academic performance of social groups as defined by their ethnicity, gender, class or other structural characteristic. This means that students from subordinated social groups require conditions and practices that ensure their equitable educational engagement, that is, curricular practices that are open to their linguistic and literacy practices and that develop and extend their capacities to the same degree as any other social group.

However, the notoriously individualistic conditions and practices of higher education not only amplify individual differences in abilities and interests, but also amplify the effects of privileging and disprivileging (Rizvi, 1987). For this reason, participative equity calls for the collective educational engagement, such as proposed by critical interdependent acculturation (Eijkman, 2003a). In this way, systemic equity draws not only on the social nature of the learning but also emphasises its social outcomes. It advocates curricular practices that enable students to see the content and conduct of their own learning more reflectively and more critically (Lankshear et al., 1997; Eijkman, 2003a). Moreover, the notion of systemic participation as collective engagement draws attention to the problem of inequity as being essentially a systemic problem for structurally disprivileged social groups, and not just a problem for those select individuals who manage to gain access.

On this basis, participative justice calls for collective equality in educational engagement, thus defining systemic equity as associated with institutional conditions and practices necessary for the equal and collective realisation of self-development and self-determination of all social groups.

To speak of 'privileging' and 'disprivileging' therefore, and to perceive equity in participative and collective terms, is to expose the problem of educational disengagement as being located not within social groups marginalised because of social class, ethnicity, or geographic location, but rather within the power arrangements that operate through the curricular practices of higher education. In this way, we problematise the distributive paradigm and its disregard of the role of disprivileging mainstream curricular practices instead of problematising the skills and abilities of marginalised social groups. Ultimately, systemic equity in higher education 'is intimately associated with assumptions about what should be learned there, and how' (Wright, 1989:99). Thus, curricular practices constitute 'the arena where the great contradictions around education and social justice condense' (Connell, 1994:138). While this is detailed in Eijkman (2003a; 2003b) suffice to identify here the dynamics of privileging and disprivileging via hegemonic curricular practices.

Social class and curricular practices

Social class, although a concept often missing from current educational research, nevertheless plays a significant role in, and is a necessary condition of, educational privileging and disprivileging (Connell, 1994; Linkon, 1999). In brief, 'social class is a major regulator of the distribution of students to privileging discourses and institutions ... if we are serious, then we

have to consider the constraints and grip of class-regulated realities' (Bernstein, 1996 p.11). I propose we confront these 'class-regulated realities' by approaching class relations in higher education in terms of their everyday politics; how, at the micro-level, its curricular practices embody and reconstitute macro-level power arrangements.

> Each particular way of constructing the curriculum (i.e., organising the field of knowledge and defining how it is to be taught and learned) carries social effects. Curriculum empowers and disempowers, authorizes and de-authorizes, recognises and mis-recognises different social groups and their knowledges and identities. (Connell, 1994 p. 140)

Importantly, class relations are not simply economic. Socio-cultural and linguistic dimensions constitute key social class signifiers. There is an indisputable body of educational literature (See Eijkman 2003a) that spells out the colonisation of education by the (urban, white, Anglo) middle and upper classes at the expense of working class and other marginalised social groups. Critical in this 'colonisation' is the role of class-regulated cultures, social languages and literacy practices, or, in a word, D/discourses.

The terms Discourse (with a capital 'D') and discourse (with a lower case 'd') as formulated by Gee (1996; 1999a; 1999b), constitute key concepts in the discourse of participative equity. Succinctly put, capital 'D' Discourses are 'ways of being in the world', or 'ways of life' into which we are socialized. On the other hand, the term 'discourse' with a lower case 'd' refers to 'language-in-use' (Gee, 1999a), or to use Heath's (1983) phrase 'ways with words'. Because culture and language are interdependent, with language being a necessary precondition for, and a consequence of, cultural engagement, and therefore a medium of culture and a 'broker' of cultural process" (Gee, 1996; Lankshear et al., 1997), the term 'D/discourse' refers to the interdependent cultural and linguistic dimensions of social practice.

Furthermore, D/discourses are not only historically contingent, but are defined "in relationships of complicity or contestation with other Discourses" (Gee, 1999a p. 22). However, even though, politically speaking, D/discursive diversity (like ethnicity) constitutes 'micro-differences', societal power arrangements, such as in education, arbitrarily transform them into macro-inequalities for purposes of privileging and disprivileging. This points to the critical interplay between what Gee (1996) calls primary and secondary D/discourses. Primary D/discourses refer to the specific socio-cultural settings and language elements into which we are apprenticed from birth and which constitute 'our first social identity, and something of a base within which we acquire or resist later Discourses' (Gee, 1996 p. 137). These primary D/discourses are inseparably bound up with social class, ethnicity and other key 'regulators', such as rurality (growing up in 'the bush'). Therefore, because of their diverse primary Discourse communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia's far north, working class students in urban housing estates, and upper and middle-class students in prestigious boarding schools may all use English, but they "use language, behaviour, values, and beliefs to give a different shape to their experiences" (Gee, 1996 p. 141).

On the other hand, secondary D/discourses belong to groups and institutions beyond our primary social group, such as in education. They,

> build on, and extend, the uses of language and the values, attitudes and beliefs we acquired as part of our primary Discourse, and they may be more or less compatible with the primary Discourse of different social groups. It is of course a great advantage when any particular secondary Discourse is compatible (in words, deeds, and values) with your primary one. But all these secondary Discourses involve uses of language ... as well as ways of thinking,

valuing, and behaving, which go beyond the uses of language in our primary Discourse no matter what group we belong to. (Gee, 1996 p. 142)

From this discussion, three inferences logically follow. First, economic considerations, while undoubtedly important, are not the sole factor in educational privileging and disprivileging. Second, the boundaries between primary and secondary D/discourses are not immutable, enabling secondary D/discourses to filter into primary ones. Third, privileging and disprivileging constitute not a binary but a continuum along which various degrees of privileging and disprivileging may be experienced. These inferences lead to the deduction that the very raison d'etre of privileging and disprivileging is not to be found in any D/discursive differences per se, but in their politicisation as power-laden institutionalised practices, such as curricular practices in higher education, which privileges one D/discourse above others. Moreover, the capacity of social groups to integrate the D/discourse of education into their primary D/discourse varies considerably, and it is here that social class and power play a key role.

In relation to the secondary D/discourse of education, subordinated social groups must not only value this D/discourse as a pathway to educational success, but they also need the necessary resources to filter the key elements of the educational D/discourse into their children's' primary Discourse, so as to advantage them in the educational stakes (Connell, 1994; Gee, 1996). It is here that in general, middle and upper class families are well placed. They are much better resourced to build into their primary D/discourse those values and practices that resonate with the values and practices of educational D/discourses. This is generally not possible to anywhere near the same degree with many working class families (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Jones, 1991). Thus, the values, beliefs, ways of thinking, and the language and literacy practices of the secondary Discourse of education are filtered into the primary Discourse, the lifeworlds, of middle class families. This ensures that their primary D/discourse is closely aligned with the secondary D/discourse of academia. Middle class students therefore, from very early on, have been immersed in a home-based cultural model in which social practices highly valued and rewarded in education, permeate their very identities (Gee, 1996). Another aspect of social class is that the socially and culturally dominant groups have the power to establish the privileged status of their D/discourse as the dominant and 'officially examinable' one in education (Gee, 1999a; Lankshear, 1997; Jones, 1991). Thus, by virtue of institutionalised power arrangements, these socially and culturally dominant groups ensure that 'educational success is patterned along distinct lines of prior discursive experience, associated with membership of particular social groups' (Lankshear, 1994:30). On this basis, students who belong to subordinated social groups, and whose home-based D/discursive practices do not resonate sufficiently with the D/discourse of academia, are excluded from becoming 'educationally literate', that is, from gaining mastery in the dominant, secondary Discourse of academia (Gee, 1996).

At the same time, because even among subordinated social groups the alignment between their primary D/discourses and the D/discourse of academia varies, there are degrees of privileging and disprivileging. Hence, not all working class, indigenous, rural and isolated students are necessarily educationally disprivileged. This is because some families manage, in various degrees, to filter into their primary D/discourse, and thereby expose their children to, the middle class and institutionally valued practices of the D/discourse of education (Gee, 1999b). For instance, children of highly educated indigenous parents who are high level bureaucrats will in all likelihood have been exposed to levels of filtering similar to many middle class children, and are therefore at the privileged rather than disprivileged end of the spectrum. However, the extent to which students from socially marginalised groups lack that filtering, their identities; their experiences, values, beliefs, knowledge priorities, logics, grammars, language, literacy

practices, ways of representing truth, and ways of arguing and establishing correctness, do not connect with the D/discourse of education (Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1999b).

The logical conclusion is that D/discursive privileging and disprivileging is shot through with class-based power arrangements. The curricular practices of middle-class dominated education institutions are hegemonic in that they have politicised D/discursive differences by refusing to validate the D/discourses of subordinated social groups in order to sustain the D/discursive domination and thereby the educational privileging of the middle class. Hegemonic curricular practices naturalise middle class knowledge and literacy practices by defining them as 'real' knowledge and as pre-ordained forms of language and literacy. In this way, they marginalise and disprivilege the experiences, ways of organising knowledge, and ways of using language, of subordinated groups, thereby positioning working class and indigenous students as D/discursive outsiders.

Towards systemic equity

According to the participative equity paradigm, a more equitable way of organising learning is to create equitable social conditions and relations necessary for the equal and collective realisation of self-development and self-determination of all social groups. To achieve this, curricular practices need to be open to the cultural milieus, social languages, and literacy practices of all Discourse communities. Redirecting the educational trajectories of disprivileged social groups calls for a counter-hegemonic approach, such as that of participative curricular justice.

Admittedly, educational institutions cannot be expected to overcome wider socio-structural inequalities. However, they can take responsibility for providing conditions and practices that promote the equal and collective self-development and self-determination of relatively powerless D/discursive outsiders who find themselves in extremely powerful institutions (Connell, 1994).

Participative equity therefore approaches curricular practice as a sociocultural environment and political space open to counter-hegemonic praxis. At the same time, whilst appreciating multiplicity and difference, which makes room for previously silenced histories and voices, participative curricular justice, rejects a ludic postmodern political and moral relativism that tolerates a range of meanings ‘without advocating any one of them’ (McLaren, 1991 p.11). In keeping with its focus on social justice, albeit one that refers to a historically inherited, socially constructed regulative principle open to continuous negotiation, it interrogates all D/discourses equally, in relation to oppressive and exploitative practices.

In conclusion, while conventional curriculum discourse promotes curriculum practice as ideologically neutral and institutionally innocent, this counternarrative stresses the relationships between curricular practice, culture, power and politics. This enables us to see asymmetrical power arrangements, and how social class interacts primarily with ethnicity, gender, and geography to position students as agents comprising multiple, classed, ethnicised, gendered and geographically located subjectivities, discursively embedded in complex and contradictory everyday learning environments.

At the same time, university academics occupy agentic subject positions and are thereby in a position to either support or challenge D/discursive privileging. It is therefore possible to enhance systemic equity when institutions and academics decide to utilise their position of relative power—that is their agentic subject positions—to develop more inclusive curricular practices. The point is that power-holders in higher education are in a position to actively shape conditions that work either for or against equity. Participative curricular justice invites these

power-holders to critically reflect on, and respond to, their role in the maintenance of social exclusion. Educators are invited to open their curricular practices and make them D/discursively inclusive by incorporating the D/discourses and interests of the least advantaged, and thereby increase the collective equity prospects for all. Consequently, while D/discursive outsiders provide the raison d'etre of this paper, the arguments presented here inexorably shift the pressure for transformation to the higher education system and its curricular practices.

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