

Fitting-In Whilst Standing-Out In The Academy

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Abstract

This reflective think piece looks back on my experiences, thus far, as a 'non-traditional HE (higher education) student' (Bowl, 2001), as I move from graduate study into the doctoral school.

Having uncovered some of my anxieties and dilemmas around professional and academic identity formation and integration, whilst attempting to retain my individuality and sense of self as a working-class 49 year old feminist socialist countercultural woman, I explore a range of multidisciplinary literature in search of guidance and insight, examining strategies for non-traditional HE students such as mentoring, peer support and social networks.

The piece concludes with my personal recognition, developed from a diverse body of literature, of the valuable contributions made to academic institutions by non-traditional HE students. I highlight the need for mechanisms of solidarity to ensure mentoring, peer support and public scholarship increasingly cultivate a truly diverse and dynamic 21st century academy. And thus, how I might navigate my own path through the next few years, adapting an earlier idea by Reay et al. (2010) to find ways of fitting-in *whilst* standing-out.

Going Through Changes

In the summer of 2013 my 44th birthday coincided with three significant events; my long-term relationship ended, my youngest child left school, and I was diagnosed with a degenerative joint connectivity disorder. The culmination of these events was a realisation that, just as had been posited by Walters (2000), in order to stay afloat,

I needed to view my imposed situation as an opportunity to embark upon something completely new.

My career, thus far, had consisted predominantly of youth work, further education (FE) teaching, and as a trainer for other youth work professionals. For years I had been toying with the idea of returning to higher education, but until now, home and family responsibilities had always prevented me from taking the next step, echoing the experiences of the mature mother HE students described by Edwards (1990).

However, since my health was now pointing me towards a less physical and more cerebral career path, I decided to take the plunge and applied for a place on the University of Lincoln (UoL) Social Sciences degree. I chose to study at the Lincoln College campus, as frankly the prospect of venturing onto a university campus at my age, and after so long out of formal education, felt pretty daunting (Shanahan, 2000), even after years of working with young people.

It sounds like a cliché but, almost immediately I felt as though a flame had been reignited in my head. I had always considered myself well-informed and engaged politically, as a proudly working-class socialist feminist, but until this point had not encountered sociological, criminological and political theory which challenged or substantiated my views, or considered how and why I had formed my opinions and allegiances. The opportunities to debate with fellow students in seminars, researching and structuring arguments were all new to me, but I relished every moment. My ethnographic independent study into gender and age amongst illegal rave attendees was a labour of love, but was also very well received. I even had a journal article accepted for publication whilst still an undergraduate. According to Newton et al. (2011), these types of new experiences can motivate students to find out more about pursuing an academic career. I certainly felt this was true in my case. I now had the confidence to apply for courses on campus at UoL and chose the interdisciplinary MA Gender Studies course, which gave me the opportunity to further develop my research around women, ageing, dance drugs and transgressive countercultures.

Alongside my studies I secured a short-term contract as a Research Assistant, working with the School of Pharmacy and Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) on a project exploring reflective writing and professional identity

formation, which prompted me to reflect on my own plans for an academic career and recognise how little I really knew about how to achieve my goals. I was the first person in my family to get a degree and none of my friends were academics, so the idea that I could earn a living from thinking, debating, writing and researching was quite alien to me (Bowl, 2003).

Fortunately one of my fellow students on the MA came from a family of academics and with her help and encouragement I started to ask lecturers about opportunities to develop my professional academic identity and skills. I registered with my School as an Ambassador and subsequently worked on a public engagement project with the late Professor Jacqui Briggs, who really welcomed me on board and inspired me. As a working-class woman with academic aspirations, finding successful women who had started out like me made aiming high seem more realistic (Reay, 2002), which led me to volunteering with my School on a pilot project in partnership with Crimestoppers, researching students' awareness of crime, prevention and support services.

In the summer of 2018 I presented papers at three very different academic conferences. In June, alongside Dr Keivan Ahmadi, I took our LHERI research into professional identity formation to the Pharmacy Education conference at Manchester University and in July I accompanied Jill Jameson and Kate Strudwick to the British Criminological Society conference in Birmingham where we presented the initial findings of the Crimestoppers pilot project. Without the unwavering support and encouragement from these members of staff I doubt I would ever have been brave enough to stand up and share my work with a roomful of successful academics. But they were both fabulous and fascinating experiences from which I learnt a great deal.

I was genuinely excited to attend lectures given by people whose books I had been reading and it dawned on me that they had become almost like rock stars to me. In a slip of the tongue I even told someone I had just been to a festival, not a conference.

In September I took my own paper, drawn from my MA independent study, to the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) conference at Huddersfield University and delivered my first solo presentation to an academic audience in an enormous lecture theatre. Linking up with interested parties for discussions after the presentation was invaluable and I made a number of contacts

who went onto contribute to my final MA project. It was at this point I realised I just might be able to incorporate doing what I love into a job.

Only a month later, I secured a one-year contract as a part-time Research Assistant taking responsibility for the day-to-day running of the new Crimestoppers project developed from the pilot, co-ordinating a small team of student volunteers to conduct research and develop awareness-raising campaigns. My previous work experience with young people proved indispensable and I feel very comfortable in this role, which seems to perfectly combine my specialisms and expertise.

My MA Gender Studies graduation was in January and I have just commenced my doctorate at Lincoln, which is both terrifying and thrilling in equal measure, not least because I will be going it alone this time, without the support of my MA student colleagues who made the whole of the course such a joy. Reminiscent of student interviews conducted by Shanahan (2000) and Thomas (2002), for me the hardest part of the MA was undertaking the independent study during the summer, away from the campus environment and student social networks.

(Inter-) Personal Dilemmas

Having reflected upon my experiences thus far, it is now very clear that two key themes stand out; the need to have the right people around me in each sphere of my life, and maintaining my identity whilst undergoing change.

Undoubtedly engaging with inspirational lecturers and mentors is invaluable to the process, but this goes beyond great teaching and pastoral care (Newson et al., 2011). For me, outside lectures, seminars and even tutorials, those conversations between students which spill over into post-lecture time are the glue holding the formal learning together. For some, who come from academic families and social circles these conversations continue beyond the university. But for many non-traditional HE students, such as those studied by Bowl (2003), critical thinking, rigorous discussion and informed theorising at an academic level are incompatible with our everyday lives outside the academy.

A wise young woman in her second year of a similar degree told me, just before I started my undergrad, that studying the social sciences would change my thinking, change my relationships and change how I saw myself. She was absolutely right.

The glazed eyes and furtively exchanged glances between my old friends when I get on my academic soapbox have not gone unnoticed, but are totally understandable. Whilst they are proud of my achievements, they did not sign up to take the course.

Indeed recently, with one eye focused on not becoming the eponymous character in *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1980), I have made a conscious decision to rein myself in from introducing a raft of theory, quotes and empirical evidence to many a lively pub or dinner party discussion, in a way which I would not do with my university friends; instead, attempting to manage the precarious balance between 'investing in a new improved identity and holding onto a cohesive self.' (Reay, 2002, p403). It is not entirely by accident that I have, with only a couple of exceptions, kept these two social groups separate (Goulding et al., 2002) particularly since my work is largely criminological ethnography (Ward, 2008), but that is a whole other paper in itself.

Thus I am presented with a dilemma. How do I engage sufficiently with other academics in order to stimulate and maintain my own critical thinking and knowledge production as I embark upon my doctorate, whilst not simultaneously losing my existing identity, sense of self and pre-existing relationships with friends and family?

Many students from non-academic backgrounds have asked themselves these questions as they move into academia (Bowl, 2001; 2003). But at approaching 50, am I perhaps questioning this more than a young scholar, as I have such established, engrained relationships and a strong sense of self, that the transition seems so significant. As I have already mentioned, I am proudly working-class and have certainly never been known for trying to blend in. My rainbow-coloured hair, piercings and style of dress, to quote *Spinal Tap* (Reiner, 1994) 'like an Australian's nightmare', are all external presentations of my internal countercultural idiosyncrasies with which I am perfectly happy.

On the face of it, none of this has to change, but in order to navigate both lives will I have to consciously compartmentalise each one to the point of having two Goffmanesque (1959) distinct, yet parallel public identities? And if so, how do I maintain them both as authentic, as one inevitably impacts upon the other? As a novice feminist ethnographer, concerns around 'immersion' (Ward, 2008), 'authenticity and rapport' (Phillip and Bell, 2017) are never far from the forefront of

my mind. Thus, adopting my new-found scholarly approach to problem-solving, I turned to the contemporary literature for some insight.

Making the (Inter-) Personal, Academic

Returning to the starting point of this reflection, I could immediately see how Walters' (2000) 3 R's framework, the mature student's process of redundancy, recognition and regeneration applied. Becoming 'redundant' as a partner, a parent of school-age children and as an able-bodied youth worker certainly brought about a period of 'recognition' that change was taking place and I had to choose to either passively allow it or actively embrace the opportunities it held. The impact of my undergraduate degree, could indeed be described as 'regeneration', a process of self-actualisation, which Walters (2000) articulates using language I much prefer to the commonly used term 'bettering myself' which leaves me feeling uncomfortable, particularly in terms of my relationships with my existing friends and family.

A substantial body of empirical literature on higher education students with a range of intersectional, non-traditional characteristics including age, gender, class and ethnicity agree on three key factors which can be central to their academic success: role models and mentors, peer support, and social networks (Bowl, 2001; 2003; Shanahan, 2000; Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2002; 2003; Walters, 2000). It almost goes without saying that accomplished, established members of any professional community are needed to help someone to integrate into and understand a new working environment, however for non-traditional HE students top-down mentoring is only part of the story (Res-Sisters, 2017). Locating staff and students from similarly non-traditional backgrounds and establishing either virtual or actual collectives (Tarrant and Cooper, 2017), communities of practice and social groups has become an increasingly invaluable strategy for, for example, older, working-class, feminist, ethnic minority and disabled students (Bowl, 2010; 2014; Reay, 2009; 2010).

Having read about a range of such communities, for me, these peer support and mentoring collectives and collaborations seemed to hold the key to my dilemma of how to manage 'multiple subjectivities' (Bosanquet, 2017) or a 'hybrid' identity (Alkhaled, 2017) in academia. Once again, with the right people around me I would be in a better position to both develop my academic and professional identity, whilst

consciously maintaining my existing sense of self as an older, working-class, countercultural woman (Res-Sisters, 2017).

Concluding Thoughts

Returning to Walters' (2000), viewing the 3 Rs process as cyclical and dynamic helped me to understand how I had, indeed, changed as a person, whilst many of those pre-existing relationships I had retained along the way were those which had been able to adapt not only to the changes I was undergoing, but to how the dynamics of our relationship also changed those individuals. Moreover, I needed to recognise that these changes were not a one-way street. This led me to reflecting, once again, on the public engagement work I have undertaken as a UoL School Ambassador and realising that, thanks to my working-class roots, I not only already speak the language of 'the public', but I have been informally brokering relationships between the academy and members of the public all along, whilst sharing my new-found knowledge and enthusiasms with people I know. To avoid the glazed eyes and furtive glances in future, I just need to work more consciously on my language and strategies for bridging the gap between lecture theatre and public house.

Thus, I hope that non-traditional HE students, like me, will begin to recognise that they hold vital connections to communities beyond the academy walls (Pereira, 2016; Phipps, 2016) and through creating communities of practice and collectives, together we are able to resist total assimilation into our institutions, support one another to capitalise on our pre-existing identities (Res-Sisters, 2017) and collectively find ways of 'fitting-in *whilst* standing-out' in the academy (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

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