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## Democracy, emancipation and widening participation in the UK: Changing the 'distribution of the sensible'

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### ABSTRACT

The broad concern of this paper is how the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation might be conceived. This theme is explored through examining the contribution of a Rancierian conception of emancipation and democracy to rethinking widening participation in higher education. Following Ranciere, it is argued that taking equality as a starting point in higher education, rather than as a goal to be achieved through education, disrupts a prevailing logic of education as necessarily providing a pathway to emancipation. From this view the pedagogic practices of explication and mastery, which Ranciere argues work to separate academic reason and practical reason, need no longer be understood as the only way to be academic. It is proposed that this 'redistribution of the sensible' enables higher education to be conceived in ways other than available in ongoing educational debates and enables a move beyond an assimilation–recognition binary. Instead, widening participation can be understood as a space for opening up to experience, transformation and change for both academics and students. From this view, democracy is enacted in the here and now, rather than a goal for the future, and practice can be understood as a site for change.

### KEYWORDS

Equality; democracy; emancipation; social change; widening participation

### Introduction

Ongoing inequality in the UK (Browne & Hood 2016, Dorling, 2015b), increased in-work poverty (MacInnes *et al.* 2015) and increasing xenophobia (Toynbee 2014, Wearing 2016) suggest that it is timely to consider current educational theories, policy and practice to explore how higher education might contribute to producing more democratic and socially just societies, both in the UK and beyond. While mass education has been achieved in the UK, with 47% of 17 to 30 year olds attending higher education (BIS 2015), social policy research suggests this has not contributed to greater overall social mobility (Boliver 2011, Britton *et al.* 2016, Goldthorpe 2016). Furthermore, a very traditional understanding of higher education students currently prevails in widening participation policy, with 'bright young people' the focus in recent policy documents

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(Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2011). Rather than higher education being a right for all those who wish to participate (Holmwood and Bhambra 2012), enrolments in English universities have declined significantly for particular disadvantaged groups since the introduction of increased fees in 2012. There has been a 58% decrease (150,000 students) in the take up of part-time undergraduate study since 2010/11 (HEFCE website 2016) and while not all these students are from underrepresented groups, many are (Harman 2016). Moreover, Burke (2012) points out that an underlying cultural hegemony in higher education institutions remains unchallenged in recent policy with widening participation conceived as assimilation into mainstream academic practices of higher education rather than the broadening of current institutional values and practices. This can work to exclude and marginalise particular social groups, including those from working class families. Do we need to begin to think differently about widening participation in higher education and the often taken for granted assumption that widening participation will necessarily produce more democratic and socially just societies? And if so, what theoretical resources might be useful for thinking about education and democracy?

In starting from the position that practice and theory are intricately intertwined, key educational debates are traced in the paper to examine the ways the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation are conceived and the pedagogic practices connected with particular conceptions. These longstanding debates have already been well rehearsed in the literature on education and democracy (e.g. Dewey 1966, Pelletier 2009, Noddings 2011, Reay 2011), but are re-introduced to throw an alternative position into relief, which argues for a more radical understanding of democracy and its relationship with knowledge, education and emancipation. In connecting current widening participation practices to longstanding and seemingly intractable debates on democracy and education, an argument is developed for rethinking the relationship between higher education, democracy and emancipation.

The first part of the paper examines recent widening participation policy in the UK and the way the relationship between knowledge, democracy and emancipation is conceived in the dominant policy discourse of social mobility. Next, two different approaches to the organisation of education are introduced and an analysis undertaken of the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation underpinning these approaches. From one perspective, democracy in the existing education system is unlikely. From the alternative perspective, a more democratic society will result from the recognition of knowledge and experience from outside the academy. These competing views arise from critical social theory and, I propose, both inform current 'good practice' in the field of widening participation. The work of Ranciere is then introduced and the possibilities this opens up for rethinking the relationship among education, knowledge, democracy and emancipation and the implications for widening participation in higher education are discussed.

### ***Widening participation as providing a pathway to emancipation***

The idea that higher education contributes to more socially just and democratic societies by providing a pathway to knowledge, higher level skills and enhanced social mobility tends to be taken for granted in the policy domain of widening participation.

Indeed, this logic can be understood as underpinning current policy on widening participation in higher education where the primary aim is to increase access for social groups currently underrepresented in higher education (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, Callender 2014, Whitty *et al.* 2015). Groups currently targeted in widening participation policy in the UK include those from black and minority ethnic groups (BMEs), low income students, those from working class backgrounds, care leavers, disabled and mature students (HEFCE website).

Various researchers point to the ongoing prevalence of a social mobility discourse in the field of widening participation (David and Bathmaker 2010, Reay 2012, Callender *et al.* 2014) and an analysis of recent higher education policy documents from the UK reinforces this view. For example, in *Students at the Heart of the system*, the white paper on higher education prepared by the coalition government in the UK (2011), Chapter 5 was dedicated to the theme of: 'Improved social mobility through fairer access'. The following excerpt from the introduction to the chapter stresses a relationship between higher education, higher wages and access to professional occupations:

Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds. But as we set out in our recent strategy for social mobility, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*, there are significant barriers in the way of bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education. This chapter sets out how we will promote fairer access without undermining academic excellence or institutional autonomy. We expect higher education institutions to be active partners, challenged and supported by a strengthened Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (p. 64).

Furthermore, the emphasis on higher education as a route to social mobility is reinforced in more recent policy, including the Green Paper released in November 2015 (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2015). The document outlines policy proposals for higher education in the UK with widening participation a centrepiece of the proposed strategy. The title of the green paper: 'Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' points directly to a concern with social mobility. The government plan to double the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds commencing higher education study by 2020 and, during the same period, to increase the number of BME students going to higher education by 20%. In a section called 'Boosting social mobility' (p. 13) we are informed that:

Higher education is an important driver of social mobility. As a One Nation Government, we believe that anyone with the talent and potential should be able to benefit from higher education. We will continue to push for better access, retention and progression for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups.

A social mobility discourse is also evident in much research on widening participation. For example, as part of a critical analysis of changes to UK Higher Education following the Browne Review, Vignoles (2013) examined the relationship between widening participation and improved levels of social mobility. While recognising that widening participation is 'a goal in its own right', she argues that it is 'also crucial because a degree is likely to have a substantial impact on an individual's economic

prosperity and hence on their social mobility' (p. 118). She also notes that this more general claim requires qualification as the economic benefits of a degree vary in relation to the university attended and the subject studied. However, Vignoles (2013) stresses that the social mobility discourse evident in the White Paper (of 2011) will not necessarily lead to greater equality as it implies that at the same time as some students move up the socio-economic ladder, others will drop down.

It could be argued, then, that an underlying assumption in the prevailing discourse of social mobility in widening participation policy is that participating in higher education is emancipatory. In other words, higher education is understood as the means for overcoming social inequality and the political project is to ensure equal access to higher education for groups previously underrepresented in the academy.

### ***Critical approaches to conceiving knowledge, democracy and emancipation***

#### ***Bourdieu and rational pedagogy***

A contrasting perspective can be found in the theory of education proposed by Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, education is the means by which the prevailing class system is reproduced rather than a site for social change and emancipation. Using the concepts of habitus, capital and field, he argued that working class students were at a disadvantage when they entered the academy as their working class habitus prevented them from developing the cultural capital they needed to be successful at university (1984, 1998; 1990). Counter to much widening participation policy, then, a Bourdieusian perspective suggests that providing access to higher education for working class students will fail to produce greater equality as these students do not have the requisite cultural capital to succeed in the academic system.

Furthermore, the 'symbolic violence' embedded in the education system, which works to reproduce class inequalities, goes largely unrecognised. Working class students often self-select and do not enter a system that they know is not for 'the likes of us', or if they do enter, are unsuccessful as the dominant culture of the academy is unfamiliar and cannot be recognised. This 'misrecognition' is understood as individual intellectual deficit rather than a structural injustice. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the combined technical and social function of education encourages active participation in the system, through the need to gain qualifications, alongside the systematic 'misrecognition' of the way power operates in and through the system, through the privileging of an arbitrary culture, and this results in the working class contributing to their own domination. The concept of 'misrecognition' suggests that the working class are unable to truly understand their own experience in the education system and in this sense is very closely aligned to the Marxist notion of false consciousness, whereby people are unaware of their own oppression and domination and how things really are. From this view, change can only occur through changing the dominant structure as: *'the dominated perceive the dominant through the category that the relation of domination has produced and which are thus identical to the interests of the dominant'* (Bourdieu 1998, p. 121).

According to Bourdieu, not only are the working class complicit in their domination but the mystification of the relationship between education and class is

maintained by academics through the hierarchical practices of the academy. Through subscribing to the rules and regulations within academia, academics actively maintain knowledge hierarchies within the system, and beyond. Bourdieu, however, sees this hierarchy as inevitable and not necessarily a problem as it enables the educational field to remain autonomous and academic authority to be maintained. Indeed, according to Bourdieu, the academic (as public intellectual) is “one who relies in political struggle on his competence and specific authority, and the values associated with the exercise of his profession, like the values of truth or disinterest...” (cited in Calhoun, p. 39).

For Bourdieu, social change and emancipation will be achieved through developing a reflexive knowledge about the world, with academics playing a key role in this process through drawing attention to ongoing oppression. Somewhat paradoxically though, a reflexive approach is developed through a critical training in the academy. This reflexive method seeks to narrow the gap between truth and ideology by revealing the truth of domination. This is evident when he claims that sociology is: alone in a position to bring these mechanisms [of domination] to light, must choose now more than ever between putting its rational instruments of knowledge at the service of an increasingly rational domination, or rationally analysing domination and especially the contribution that rational knowledge can make to domination (Bourdieu 1998, p. 91)

For Bourdieu, then, academic reason provides the pathway to emancipation through revealing the hidden operation of power.

There is no shortage of widening participation literature drawing on the theory of Bourdieu. For example, Burke (2012), Reay (2003), Bathmaker (2015) have all drawn on Bourdieusian concepts to point to the systematic exclusion of working class students in the British higher education system. There is a tendency in this literature, however, to represent widening participation students as oppressed and marginalised by the education system as a direct result of their working class habitus. Burke (2012), for instance, evokes the notion of ‘misrecognition’ when pointing to the ways widening participation discourses such as: ‘raising aspirations’, ‘fair access’ and ‘lifting barriers’ shift the responsibility of a failure to succeed at university to the poor, thereby making structural exclusions, inequalities and the reality of poverty invisible. Moreover, Reay offers Bourdieu and Passeron’s notion of ‘rational pedagogy’ as a solution to bringing about greater equality and a more democratic education system. The reality that not all knowledges get to ‘count’ leads Reay to propose that rather than assuming the formal equality of students, policies and practices should take cultural inequalities into account (2011, p. 3). Following Bourdieu, Reay contends that the democratisation of education will be achieved through making the dominant class habitus available to all classes. In other words, all social groups need to have access to ‘what counts’ if they are to gain equality. While Bourdieu and Passeron envisaged rational pedagogy as a way of producing a more democratic education system, they were pessimistic about the likelihood of this change occurring (1990).

The notion of rational pedagogy can be understood as underpinning academic literacy practices, which have been incorporated in various widening participation programmes in higher education (e.g. Klinger and Murray 2012, McLellan *et al.* 2016, in press). A key aim of academic literacy is to introduce students to the cultures and

conventions of higher education in order to bridge the cultural deficit working class students and other marginalised groups bring to the academy. Students are taught skills in critical thinking, essay writing, presenting a strong academic argument, referencing, grammar, as well as becoming familiar with assessment criteria and the ‘rules of the game’, so that they are equipped with the discursive resources to be successful in the academy. Indeed, this approach underpins many of the practices in the Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) programme, a widening participation programme at a UK university. I am the programme director of HEIS and the assumptions underpinning many of the practices and techniques used on HEIS are discussed later in the paper.

In summary, Bourdieu draws attention to the ongoing oppression of working class students in and through education. For Bourdieu, education contributes to ongoing inequality rather than providing a pathway to emancipation. There is no social mixing for Bourdieu, with ‘the academic’ and ‘the oppressed’ remaining firmly fixed in their respective positions (Pelletier 2009). From this perspective, the practices of academics are unlikely to change. Emancipation will only be achieved through revealing the truth of domination and, paradoxically, this will be made possible as a result of the autonomy and concomitant authority of the academy. Democracy for Bourdieu, then, is something in the future, once the ‘truth’ of oppression is recognised.

### *Theories of recognition*

A different understanding of the relationship between democracy and education can be found in theories of lifelong learning, particularly those drawing on feminist literatures (e.g. Burke and Jackson 2007). These approaches direct attention to diverse knowledge and learning gained in sites other than higher education. While, at times theories of lifelong learning might draw on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and the associated concept of embodiment, the implications for the organisation of education are quite different to that of rational pedagogy. For example, Nell Noddings argues for an education system that recognises diverse knowledge and in so doing ‘respects every form of honest work’ (2011, p. 1). From this perspective, a more equal and socially just society will be achieved through a more democratic approach to the recognition of knowledge other than those produced in the academy and an academic education is only one way, among various educational possibilities, that should be recognised and valued.

The theme of ‘recognition’ underpins much of the lifelong learning literature and various scholars have drawn on theories of recognition to examine education, democracy and social justice. For example, Tett (2014) uses Fraser’s notion of participatory parity to examine social justice in the Scottish education system and West *et al.* 2013 have used Honneth’s notion of recognition as an essential human need to explore how and why non-traditional students remain in higher education. Whilst there is an ongoing debate between Fraser and Honneth as to how recognition should be theorised (Fraser and Honneth 2003), they both point to recognition as a means for producing more socially just societies. For Fraser, a core concept is ‘parity of participation’ whereby ‘justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers’ (p.36). Misrecognition



occurs when institutionalised cultural norms produce a lack of ‘parity of participation’. It is important to note that this is a different way of conceiving misrecognition to that proposed by Bourdieu (James 2015). Fraser uses the term in the sense of a failure to recognise excluded and marginalised actors within society and uses the concept of ‘status subordination’ to describe the institutionalised subordination of particular groups.

Drawing on Fraser’s work on social justice and the notion of parity of participation, Burke (2012) provides an insightful analysis of widening participation policy and practice in the UK. She argues that Fraser’s theory of social justice highlights the need for widening participation strategies that focus on challenging institutional and departmental cultural values and social practices, rather than ‘remedial approaches to regulate and ‘correct’ the (working class) candidate’s taste ...’ (p. 180). Instead, Burke argues for participatory pedagogies where students and tutors work together collaboratively to examine competing epistemological perspectives and the construction of knowledge. This is a different political project to Bourdieu’s notion of rational pedagogy as it emphasises the recognition of a previously excluded social identity, in this instance a working class identity, rather than the assimilation of this identity into a dominant ruling class culture. From this perspective, democracy, emancipation and social change is to be achieved through ‘participatory parity’ and recognising experience and knowledge that comes from outside the academy. And importantly, this opens up space within the academy for difference and diversity.

However, theories of recognition have also been subject to critique. Bingham and Biesta (2010) and McNay (2008) both point out that a normalising framework implicit in much of the literature on recognition can work to fix the identity of excluded groups. Similarly to the critique of identity politics made in feminist poststructuralist theory (e.g. Lloyd 2005), the celebration and recognition of previously marginalised identities risks fixing identity rather than understanding identity as always ‘in process’. For example, in recognising an authentic working class identity by way of inclusive practices, the emphasis on the need for the institution to change rather than the individual risks essentialising a seemingly natural or authentic working class identity. Furthermore, as noted by Reay in her response to Noddings’ call for the recognition of all forms of work and the granting of authority to different educational pathways, from where might this change within the academy arise? For example, calls to change the curriculum in an effort to make it more inclusive are often understood by academics as a form of ‘dumbing down’ and a lowering of academic standards. This reaction adds empirical weight to Bourdieu’s conception of education as a relatively autonomous field.

### ***Another way for conceiving knowledge, democracy and emancipation***

I have proposed in the first part of the paper that current widening participation policy and practices are intricately interconnected with ways of conceiving the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation. But can higher education only to be understood as necessarily emancipatory; or if coming from a critical perspective, as either a site of assimilation into a dominant culture or a site for recognition of an authentic working class identity? Should the political project be one of relying on the

emancipatory potential of higher education and simply ensuring access to the academy? Or should the focus be on ‘rational pedagogy’, where the goal is to achieve social change through enabling individuals to successfully appropriate the dominant habitus? Or should the focus be one of changing the academy in an effort to recognise previously excluded social groups and the knowledges, identities and subjective experience they bring to the academy? Or is there a different way for conceiving the relationship between education, knowledge, emancipation and democracy that makes space for less fixed ways of understanding ‘the academic’ and ‘the oppressed’?

### *The ‘pedagogical myth’*

Ranciere (1991) proposes a very different logic of emancipation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In telling the story of Jacotot, a French academic teaching in Belgium in the 1820s, he provides a critique of a linear notion of progress implicit in the explicatory pedagogy of the academy. Explicatory pedagogy is the taken for granted way of teaching in the academy whereby the ‘unknowing’ novice is guided by the ‘knowing’ academic to an enhanced understanding of the topic being studied. Jacotot took up a teaching post at the University of Leuven after being exiled from France following the restoration of the monarchy in 1814. As he spoke only French, and his students spoke only Flemish, lectures and an explicatory method of teaching were not possible. In an effort to overcome this apparent obstacle, Jacotot used a bilingual copy of the *Telemaque* and was surprised that his students were able to learn French literature without needing to be led by a more knowledgeable teacher.

Jacotot’s story is used by Ranciere to introduce the notion of the ‘pedagogical myth’. He argues that an explicatory logic underpinning pedagogy, where just ‘a little further along’, ‘a few more explanations and you’ll understand it’, works to reinforce a permanent delay which separates ‘the knowing’ and ‘the ignorant’:

The pedagogical myth divides the world into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one ... It is this [superior] intelligence that allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he learned. (Ranciere, p.7)

Ross (p. xix, translator’s notes in Ranciere 1991), suggests that the story of Jacotot can be read as a broader critique of the methods of social science, and more specifically the intellectual project of Bourdieu, where sociology is used to reveal the ‘truth’ of oppression. Ranciere argues that the same distance in time and space that separates ‘the master’ from ‘the student’ also works to separate the “‘explicator of the social’ from the worker’ (Ross, p. xix). For example, in Bourdieu’s notion of misrecognition, ‘the poor’<sup>1</sup> are not conscious of their own domination and this ‘fact’ needs to be revealed by the social scientist. In other words, it is only the social scientist who is able to interpret the ‘real truth’ of the experience of the ‘the poor’ (Pelletier 2009).

It is important to stress that Ranciere’s critique of Bourdieu is not directed to the accuracy of his empirical findings. Indeed, the evidence of inequality in higher education is far too widespread (David and Bathmaker 2010, Hinton-Smith 2012, Dorling 2015a, Britton *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, Bourdieu and Ranciere are in agreement on their understanding of education as the cause of ongoing inequality. The problem

identified by Ranciere is the performative effect of Bourdieu's approach whereby 'the poor' always remain the object of study (Pelletier 2009). In other words, it is only academic 'knowers' who are able to reveal the hidden elements that contribute to ongoing inequality and oppression, and this works to produce a seemingly natural separation of academic and practical reason. For Bourdieu, only academic reason, produced in the relatively autonomous field of the academy, can reveal the gap between the real truth and ideology; and subjective experience is not to be trusted. It is the ongoing separation of academic reason and subjective experience by Bourdieu that is of concern for Ranciere.

Ranciere's approach, which draws attention to the material effects of pedagogic practice, disrupts the taken for granted understanding in much of the policy on widening participation that education necessarily provides the pathway to equality. Alternatively, argues Ranciere, explicatory practices, and the assumption of deficit and deferral embedded in these practices, provide a site for the ongoing enactment of inequality. This leads him to conclude that equality must be the starting point rather than the end goal of the pedagogic relation. In other words, rather than aspiring to equality and taking it as the goal of education, equality must be performed (or enacted). There can be no temporal delay. Establishing a relationship of equality between 'master' (teacher) and 'novice' (student) changes 'the distribution of the sensible' in terms of the (seemingly) fixed positions of the academic 'knower' and the student 'learner'. And in refusing to be positioned in these ways, education spaces become sites for enacting democratic practices in the here and now, rather than the means for achieving equality in the future. For Ranciere, pedagogic practice is a key site for producing social change.

### *Freire and critical pedagogy*

The emphasis on subjective experience and the need to change pedagogic practices might at first glance seem very similar to Freire's ideas on critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire 1996). Freire promoted a radical approach to education where the oppressed would achieve emancipation through sharing their subjective experience of the world. Rather than the teacher using a 'banking model' of knowledge distribution, where students are provided with information by the academic, a dialogic model of exchange was advocated with students and academics participating in a process of knowledge production arising from the student's own experiences. In contrast to Bourdieu, this approach recognises the subjective experience of oppression and draws on this experience as a way of producing knowledge about the world. Where Bourdieu advocates maintaining the authority of the academy and the hierarchical relations upon which this authority rests, Freire directs attention to the need to change hierarchical pedagogical practices. Similarly to Ranciere, social change is contingent upon a pedagogical relation underpinned by a principle of equality. However, Freire differs to Ranciere in that the sharing of subjective experience is used as part of a process of developing critical consciousness. For Freire, emancipation is made possible through leading students to recognise a previously misunderstood oppression (Galloway 2012, Porres *et al.* 2014).

Bingham and Biesta (2010) point out that the same logic of emancipation guiding mainstream educational policy and practice can be understood as underpinning more

radical pedagogical practices associated with consciousness raising. They propose that various educational practices, whether they are understood as formal or informal, assume that ‘one must be led to emancipation’ (p. 63) via the explication of the teacher. This view is evident even in texts with a strong democratic ambition. For example, the ghost of the educator leading students to emancipation is present in the following passage from Brookfield and Holst where they point out that:

‘Negotiation depends on informed choices, and at times there may be necessary disparity in the knowledge and skill of different group members or between learners and teacher ... As a general rule, we have found that when working with groups for whom a deliberate and intentional focus on power and hegemony comes as a surprise, or with groups who have never been exposed to critical theory, we need to assume a greater degree of responsibility ...’ (2011, p. 125).

While the context for this statement is ensuring the recognition of marginal ideas, the Marxist concept of false consciousness appears to underpin this approach. In other words, the academic explicator still needs to intervene in order to guide the student to ‘the truth’ and emancipation from the invisible operation of power. And this is where Ranciere and Freire appear to part company. From a Rancierian view, the oppressed are very aware of the operation of power and (at times) resist this by refusing to take up the social position they have been allocated. This refusal is made possible through opening up to new modes of subjectivity rather than being tied to an authentic and fixed identity (Ranciere 2014).

Ranciere’s emphasis on performativity and the material effects of academic practice provides a different way of conceiving the relationship between democracy, knowledge, education and emancipation to that available in much educational literature. Democracy is understood as an act, not a goal, and the underlying characteristic of democratic politics is an equality of intelligence (May 2010). For Ranciere, the enactment of equality encompasses a refusal to take up the position one is assigned in the social order and it is through this act, and the concomitant reconfiguring of what is able to be thought, said, felt and so on (‘the distribution of the sensible’), that social change is made possible (Hallward 2005, Deranty 2010). In drawing attention to performativity, Ranciere highlights the importance of the need for representations of equality rather than oppression in academic literature. This enables the verification of equality and in so doing provides a resource of hope as it keeps open the possibility of other ways of thinking about and being in the world (Ranciere 2004).

### ***Other ways for thinking about widening participation***

I have argued for an alternative way of conceiving the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation, and in the section that follows, current practices used on Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) are examined and other possibilities explored using a Rancierian framework. The aim of HEIS is to provide access to higher education degrees for mature students without A level qualifications (or equivalent). This is achieved through developing the skills and knowledge required for successful participation in and completion of degree programmes in a range of disciplinary areas. The programme has a strong widening participation focus and students enrolling on HEIS come from diverse educational backgrounds

and bring diverse experience onto the programme. What all have in common, however, is that this is a chance to commence university study which was not previously available for a range of reasons. The programme provides a supported entry into level 4 study through incorporating embedded study skills and academic literacy into the programme design. In addition, various pedagogic techniques are employed which could be loosely described as participatory and inclusive (Hockings *et al.* 2010, Scott *et al.* 2014). While these techniques are understood as ‘good practice’ in the field of widening participation, some of these practices create tension for me, the director of the HEIS programme, and I suggest this is connected with how the relationship between education, democracy and emancipation might be conceived.

As introduced previously, the development of academic literacy is emphasised on HEIS with the aim of inducting students into the cultures and conventions of higher education. This intervention can be understood as being underpinned by Bourdieu and Passeron’s notion of ‘rational pedagogy’ where students are provided with the opportunity to acquire aspects of cultural capital that they lack when entering the academy. However, if we approach this intervention from a Rancierian perspective we might ask: What work does teaching academic literacies perform? Is there an assumption of deficit and inequality in this intervention and is this yet another act of explication where the explicator leads the student to understanding? Teaching academic literacy could be understood as reinforcing the ongoing temporal delay associated with higher level study and implicit in the notion of level 4 to level 8 study in the academy in the UK and this appears to be the view held by Burke (2012) when she argues for pedagogic approaches that move beyond an assumption of deficit.

Another technique used frequently on HEIS and understood as ‘good’ pedagogic practice is the use of assessment for learning principles (McDowell 2008), which include frequent feedback on work and the inclusion of regular low stakes assessment. However, what is the work performed by formative assessment where: ‘some good points but this is how your work could be developed’, is a common remark? From a Rancierian perspective it can be viewed as explicatory practice and thus part of the constant delay in education which works to reaffirm ‘the master’ and ‘the novice’. Indeed, temporal delay is embedded in the process of providing feedback where work is submitted, reviewed, and then comment provided for the purpose of enhancing the next iteration or assignment. The student is indefinitely guided by the teacher when feedback is used as a pedagogic technique.

Yet another technique used on HEIS is the opportunity to experience and to practise the types of assessment that students are likely to encounter as they progress to degree study. Again, this can be understood as assimilation into the dominant academic culture where exams, essays and presentations are used as a method of ranking and ordering students. Rather than preparing widening participation students for a terrain where mastery prevails, how might we change that terrain and the existing distribution of the sensible in higher education? Can assessment practices ever be used as a way of disrupting hierarchy and verifying equality? Is it enough to discuss the work performed by assessment in higher education (e.g. Pryor and Crossouard 2008); the ways higher education orders, regulates and gives one a seemingly natural place (Reay 2012); to examine where the current assessment regime comes from and how

the academy continues to regulate the social order through assessment (Leathwood 2005); or is this simply reaffirming inequality?

And does the teaching of academic literacies necessarily need to be viewed as a form of cultural hegemony, or can it be thought of as a technique for extending students' discursive repertoires? Might the language of the academy be used for purposes other than intended? Does learning the rules of the game, which is arguably the goal of academic literacy, necessarily imply assimilation and is it an instantiation of what Fraser refers to as status subordination? Or are the processes of cultural acquisition more nuanced than the binary positions of assimilation and recognition might suggest? While Burke and Ranciere both point to the need for transformation and change in higher education and see changing pedagogical practices as integral to bringing about this change, Ranciere's avoids tying subjective experience to a fixed identity. The only normative position he advocates is the verification of equality and this enables a move beyond the seemingly fixed positions of academic (master) and student (novice) and a reconfiguring of the master-learner relationship. Why would we academics assume, for instance, that widening participation students are unable to understand and recognise their oppression and the multiple ways that power is exercised in the academy? Indeed, this assumption is troubled by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013) in their study of non-traditional students in higher education.

An underlying concern in the many questions raised above is how might we (academics) proceed to enact equality in the academy? A technique offered by Ranciere, via Jacotot, is the act of storytelling or recounting: 'The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality' (Translator's notes in Ranciere 1991, p. xxii). Following this logic, engaging with academic material in ways other than the explicatory practices so common in the academy might enable space to be made for other ways of knowing, including knowledge gained through subjective experience. For example, discussion groups enable people to engage with academic literature in relation to their own experience, while at the same time making space for the experience of others in the group. While this is not a new idea and there is a growing literature on inclusive and participatory pedagogies (e.g. Scott *et al.* 2014, Tett 2014), the key point is the change in the relation between the teacher and the student through a refusal to be positioned. The emphasis on storytelling and recognising subjective experience acknowledges multiple and sometimes opposing experiences in the group and does not presuppose that the experience of the oppressed is misunderstood. Indeed, we poor do not need an explicator to lead us to the correct meaning and 'the truth' of power.

It is important to stress that the emphasis on storytelling and group discussion is not a back door to a Habermasian argument for ideal speech and deliberative democracy, where difference is understood as able to be reconciled through rational processes and discussion (Brookfield and Holst 2011). Instead, it is an argument that points to the inherent arbitrariness of language. Language never simply reflects reality and this provides Ranciere (and me) with hope as it disrupts the possibility of ever fixing 'the real' (Bingham and Biesta 2010). While academic knowledge might seek to narrow the gap between truth and ideology, thus working to reinforce a seemingly natural separation of academic reason and practical reason, the purity of this

separation is constantly under challenge (Latour 1993, 2004) and I propose the diversity of subjective experience in a widening participation class provides an opportunity to explore and continue to challenge that separation.

A Rancierian approach enables attention to be directed to academic and student practices and experiences and ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (what it is possible to think, say and do) without fixing experience using the language of identity (Simons and Masschelein 2010). In other words, it is an approach that affirms ‘an essential instability of experience’ (Hallward 2005, p. 27). It does not, however, provide a naïve view of power, with widening participation students understood as necessarily empowered by entering the academy. Instead, it is an approach that enables widening participation students to be represented as active in the ongoing struggle around constituting ‘the academic’ and ‘the oppressed’.

From this view widening participation in higher education can be understood as a space for enacting equality by interrupting the distribution of the sensible in terms of who can be at higher education (and by implication, who can be an academic). And it is in this sense that widening participation can be understood as an inherently political space and part of a more radical political project. Through refusing to be positioned as ‘non-academic’, widening participation students can be understood as demanding equality, and in so doing creating new modes of subjectivity, including that of ‘the academic’. I propose that this movement into the academic field creates much of the tension associated with widening participation in higher education as it contaminates the purity of ‘the academic’ and the ongoing seemingly natural separation between academic and practical reason. The academy and ‘the academic’ no longer appear as autonomous as they once might have seemed.

From a Rancierian view, the spaces of widening participation provide an opportunity for opening up to experience, for both academics and students, and this provides a very different way for thinking about learning. Rather than necessarily being a space of oppression, widening participation programmes can be conceived as spaces for transformation and change for ‘the academic’ and ‘the student’. This is an approach that directs attention to aesthetics by enabling us to think, see and act in ways that were previously beyond ‘the distribution of the sensible’. And this turn to aesthetics has something useful to offer the way we might perform ‘the academic’. From this view learning can be understood as the ongoing ‘broadening of affective experience’ through developing a hospitality for what is strange (Orlie 2014, p. 172).

### **The verification of equality**

I have argued that taking equality as a starting point rather than the goal to be achieved through education provides a useful contribution to how we might conceive widening participation and the spaces of higher education more generally. Ranciere’s focus on performativity, which emphasises the work performed by pedagogical practices, enables a move beyond thinking about education as necessarily providing a route to emancipation, but in a way that does not fall into a seemingly natural separation of academic and practical reason. This provides an alternative approach to much of the critical literature on widening participation, which tends to represent widening participation students as oppressed, powerless and only acted on. The ongoing

representation of underrepresented social groups as continually dominated and oppressed may work to mask subtleties of change, transformation and transgression within the academy, and beyond.

Importantly, a Rancierian view enables the possibility of higher education as other than a site of reproduction and misrecognition in the Bourdieusian sense, where ‘the poor’ are unable to understand their own oppression. For example, the learning spaces in higher education can be reimagined as spaces for connection, where multiple experiences intersect and where students and academics can open up to what is strange rather than spaces for the exclusion of experience and consolidation of oppression. This is different to Bourdieu’s understanding of the academy as a distinct field that maintains its own hierarchies. Instead, it is an approach that draws attention to the interrelationships between theory and practice and has implications for both theory development and practices in the area of widening participation. While this paper has focused on pedagogical practices, a Rancierian perspective suggests the importance of more democratic approaches to knowledge production in the area of widening participation, and accounts which open up to subjective experience.

Counter to the view that ‘the academic’ and ‘the oppressed’ are relatively fixed subject positions, I have proposed that universities can provide a space for refusing to take up the position one is assigned in the social order, for both academics and students. Rather than assuming a master-novice relationship, the verification of equality enables different ways of thinking and being to come into view. Education need no longer be narrowly conceived as a site for the reproduction of social norms and hegemonic ways of thinking, where authentic academic and student identities remain fixed, or as a space where, through careful guidance by a Master explicator, one is able to eventually recognise their domination by the powerful. This enables academic practices to be understood as changing and less fixed, in contrast with Bourdieu’s emphasis on the structuring of practice. We need to move beyond the explicatory logic of the academy and the ongoing separation of academic and practical reason, which this logic brings into effect, if we are to have more democratic societies. If explication and mastery continue to prevail in the academy, then equality remains something for the future, something to strive for but always ‘just a little further along’

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## Note

1. ‘The poor’ is used by Ranciere as a generic term for oppressed groups.



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