

Book review

Bangeni, B & Kapp, R. (eds.). 2017. *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher education: Access, Persistence and Retention*. London & New York: Bloomsbury.

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One of the great strengths of this book, a volume in the Bloomsbury series *Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education*, is the way it holds its focus – on the pathways of black working-class, first-generation, tertiary students at the University of Cape Town – throughout its introduction, eight chapters and conclusion. It offers the reader a rich and nuanced view of what it means for these students to negotiate their entry into, and pathway through, a “relatively elite English medium historically white South African university”. The coherence of the whole work arises in part from the fact that it is based on two collaborative longitudinal studies from 2002 to 2005 and from 2009 to 2012. Significantly, this means the data for the studies comes from before the *#RhodesMustfall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements and can profitably be read retrospectively in the light of those movements.

The case studies address the effects of institutional and societal structures and discourses as enablers or inhibitors of both student progress and agency. As the second chapter indicates in relation to students negotiating university mathematics, it is a matter of the interplay between individual action and wider social structures, or (as suggested in chapter three) a matter of student lives being both constrained and agentic. As the introduction rightly points out, taking account of student agency within the network of (often conflictual) subject positions that students adopt *over time* gives more meaning to the learning pathways than a snapshot at a single moment that fixes the relationships between different aspects of identity in an unchanging structure. It also gets away from judging students' success or lack of success at university in terms of their (psychological) qualities.

The methodology of the book, based on longitudinal semi-structured interviews with students, background questionnaires, written reflections by students and related student assignments, gives full

play to the voices of students. In spite of the statements early in the chapters about post-structural theoretical frameworks, however, the use of theory is quite light.

The book seeks to explore why students persist in higher education in spite of social backgrounds that may not be conducive to learning. Through the lens of the *#RhodesMustfall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements, however, this question is shadowed by another: why do students persist when the university might not be conducive to learning? Or perhaps more pertinently, why is the university not conducive to the backgrounds from which the students come? What is foregrounded here are the students' reactions to the institution and its discourses, while the institution is very much in the background (almost out of sight) as if it is relatively unchanging. Pym and Sacks (p.157) briefly touch on this in chapter eight when they suggest that "Student success is not simply about assimilation into the institutional habitus, but also about the institutional habitus changing". Programmes like the Academic Support Programme for Engineering, the subject of chapter seven, are aimed at helping students accommodate to an existing system. Furthermore, the exploration of the case studies appears to be aimed at improving models of academic development (for students) and "facilitating meaningful access to institutional and disciplinary discourses". What should constitute a university education, and how meaningful university courses can be created to facilitate learning for all, are not in question here (and not within the scope of the book).

Each of the case studies examines the learning journeys of different students (whether as a small group, or as individuals) at different stages of their journey and in relation to different disciplines and their discourses. It is a book that highlights students' interpretations of their encounters with higher education. This includes the experience of coming from working-class schools, successfully negotiating mathematics at university, an exploration of a coloured Muslim woman withdrawing after two years' study, the role of religion in mediating students' conflicting positions, students' changing understanding of language and academic literacy, the journey from graduate to postgraduate studies, undertaking academic support for engineering students, and looking at the journeys of five students from the perspective of Bourdieu's notions of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*.

In theoretical terms, all chapters in the book are underscored by a post-structural view of multiple identities, strongly informed by Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and ambivalence within conflicting discourses. It is clear, in a number of the cases here, that students express identity ambivalence over time through what may appear to be contradictory and changing positions. This is particularly apparent when students talk about shifts in the meaning of 'home' (and all that it implies in terms of relationships and culture) when going to university.

Other theoretical perspectives are invoked in different chapters. The notion of "investment" for example is used in chapter one and chapter six to distinguish subject positions that students choose to invest in more than others, and the consequences of that for their learning journeys. In chapter seven, focusing on the Academic Support Programme for Engineering (ASPECT), Tracy Craig uses the notion of capability, focusing on "converting resources into capabilities and thereafter ... into functionings", to assess pedagogical effectiveness in terms of "fostering well-being and [choosing] a life of value" (p.149). In the final chapter, Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* are used to look at the complex transitions of students' journeys from one social context to another.

These frameworks are, on the whole, more suggestively than analytically applied. Once the theoretical framework has been put in place it tends to direct attention to what the students are saying, rather than acting as a means of analysis at every point. Throughout the book, however, there is a lot of indirect speech in the narrative that blurs the difference between student voice and authorial interpretation. The voices of the students, and the way the structure of the studies gives voice to the students, is where the real meaning of this book lies, and it is to be hoped that what it tells us can be taken into account in effecting changes to higher education that make these students' learning journeys less conflicted.



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