

Restructuring the Habitus: the case of Open Foundation students with a (dis)**ability**

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Abstract

Universities now strive to make reasonable accommodations for the circumstances of students with disabilities through enhanced disability support, but this was not always the case. This paper analyses the stories of thirty eight (38) such students who completed the Open Foundation Program (OFP) at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, between 1985 and 2011. These students had a range of conditions including mental health issues, Muscular Dystrophy, Multiple Sclerosis, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, hearing and sight impairments. They spoke of their reasons for enrolling, their experience of undertaking the program, about further study and, in many cases, successful career outcomes. The majority of these former students indicated their lives had undergone mostly positive change as a consequence of undertaking OFP. The research survey sample was collected from the University of Newcastle's Potential Enabling Program Participant Research (PEPPR) volunteer register and includes the responses of 28 women and 10 men aged in their 20s to 50s which, for the majority, focus on their abilities rather than their (dis)abilities. The analysis of their stories utilises the notion of habitus as described by Bourdieu. He wrote that habitus was a predisposition toward certain ways of behaving that are expected of "people like us" (1990b, p. 77). He claimed habitus excluded certain practices which are unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which people belong but that it otherwise has no specific rules and is not predictable (1990a, p. 355). In taking a strengths-based approach, the paper argues that these students' habitus, as Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, p. 133) suggested, is not static or immutable, it can evolve in response to changing experiences and circumstances and often lead to more fulfilling and satisfying lives due to educational enrichment. Likewise, their stories reflect that the habitus of universities is also changing as the enactment of equity agendas challenges and expands notions of the able student.

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of survey data from respondents who identified as having some kind of disability when they enrolled in Open Foundation (OF), a mature age tertiary entry program at the University of Newcastle. OF was established in 1974, only nine years after the University of Newcastle became autonomous, as part of the Community Programmes Department which linked university to community and around 30 people completed the pilot program in that first year. OF is one of the earliest, and has become the largest, enabling program in Australia and now enrolls roughly 3,000 enabling students per year. Over its forty two years of operation an increasing number of students have been enrolling in OF with some level of disability. My research reports on the outcomes of some of those students.

Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines people with disabilities as having "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (2006). Contrary to framing these students as embodying "disability", this paper instead focuses on their substantial "abilities" and like Smit (2012)

problematizes disadvantage and deficit discourses which do not appreciate the capacity of these students to successfully complete university study and, in many cases, enter professional careers which enhanced both their own lives and contributed to the wider society. It is clear, as evidenced by their comments that the habitus of these people changed as a consequence of undertaking this tertiary preparation course. But it is also possible to see that the habitus of the university is changing in response to the need to support this cohort of students and to comply with equity policies.

Defining habitus

Academics such as Reay (1995, p. 353) have commented on the indeterminacy of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. He stated "I do not like definitions much" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 95), preferring to argue instead that it should be used as a method of analysis rather than an immutable and unchanging concept. As such, he argued that habitus could be restructured from experiences (1992, p. 134). Jenkins refers to the "ontological mysteries of the habitus" (1992, p. 130) and Cicourel (1994) notes habitus "seems in one sense to be everything, yet hard to pin down observationally", while Brubaker (1993, p. 217) suggests it is "not intended to be precise or unambiguous". Reay (1995, p. 357) states "Paradoxically, the conceptual looseness of habitus also constitutes a potential strength" because it is permeable and responsive to what goes on around it. According to DiMaggio (1979) it can be continually modified by encounters with the outside world.

Bourdieu and the colleagues with whom he worked over time provided many explanations of habitus. It was variously described as: "a bundle of tastes and judgemental competences" that are measured as attitudes and preferences (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) such as the attitudes of cultural superiority; or in deeply gendered subjectivities (Krais, 1993, p. 170). It is something through which meanings are made and internalized deep within both the conscious and subconscious mind as well as in the corporeal. In Bourdieu's words, it is a meaning-made-body (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 43) which is not deterministic but "a wide repertoire of possible actions, simultaneously enabling the individual to draw on transformative and constraining courses of action" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 341) which are "turned into second nature" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 63), so automatic, and "expressed through durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 70). On the one hand it implies a tendency "to behave in ways that are expected of 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 77) and excludes practices that are unfamiliar to certain groups; but at the same time it allows for the possibility of internalizing new ways of behaving and thinking.

Methodology

As part of my broader PhD research, 830 former Open Foundation Program (OFP) students registered on the University of Newcastle's Potential Enabling Program Participant Research (PEPPR) register, established by the University as a means of access to former enabling students for research purposes, were approached to participate in research on the history and impacts of OFP. 350 respondents who had completed the course between 1976 and 2012, comprising a 42% response rate, were asked standardized questions for demographic purposes as well as open-ended questions which enabled quantitative as well as qualitative

analysis of their experience before, during and after completing OFP. These data were coded and analysed using NVivo software which allowed construction of nodes for specific data and comparative analysis of coded material. Of these respondents 38 or 10.85% of the sample identified as having some form of disability upon entry to OFP. The questions they were asked are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Student survey questions

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Sex | Age on entry | Country of birth | Indigeneity | Disability |
| Course location/type | Year of enrolment | Prior education | How did you hear about OFP? | Why did you enrol? |
| Subjects chosen | Year of completion | Experience of OFP | Enduring friendships? | Life change? |
| University degree? | If so, which degree? | Year of graduation? | Career destination | Economic improvement? |
| Familial or social changes? | If so, how did relationships change? | Any other changes? | Consent to interview? | Wish to receive further information? |

Demographic data

Given the fact that the majority of respondents in the whole sample were female, numbering 272 or 78% and 78 or 22% were male, it was not surprising that the majority of students with disabilities (n=28) were also female. Likewise only 23% of the whole sample were aged 29 years or younger and these data on students with disabilities also reflect a lower percentage of young people aged less than 30 (13%) reported having a disability.

Table 2: Sex and age of students with (dis)abilities

| Females | n= | Males | n= |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| 21-26yrs | 5 | | |
| 32-39yrs | 8 | 32-37yrs | 6 |
| 40-47yrs | 9 | 40-43yrs | 2 |
| 50-59yrs | 9 | 51-55yrs | 2 |
| Total | 28 | | 10 |

Although the survey did not specifically ask what disability the respondent had upon enrolling in OFP, nevertheless this information was often provided in qualitative responses.

Table 3: Self-disclosed conditions of students with (dis)abilities

| | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Psychological illness | Mental illness | Depression | Acquired brain injury |
| Severe arthritis | Dyslexia | Physical illness | Car accident injuries |
| Sleep apnoea | Muscular dystrophy | Multiple sclerosis | Hearing loss |
| Agoraphobia | Blindness | Post-traumatic stress disorder | Tinnitus & Meniere's disease |

These data demonstrate the range and intensity of conditions OFP students are likely to present with. Some had overcome significant obstacles and displayed great courage in attempting to return to study. Their stories were both inspiring and an indication of resilience. What was characteristic of these data was that the majority of these students (28) or 73.7% entered degree programs despite the considerable impediments their conditions entailed. Also of note was the diversity of disciplines they chose to study in.

Table 4: Degree destinations of students with dis(abilities)

| Degree | n= | Degree | n= |
|-------------------|----|-------------------------|----|
| B. Arts | 6 | B. Social Work | 1 |
| B. Fine Arts | 1 | B. Nursing | 1 |
| B. Teaching | 5 | B. Science | 2 |
| B. Business | 2 | B. Speech Pathology | 1 |
| B. Social Science | 8 | B. Occupational Therapy | 1 |
| TOTAL | 22 | | 6 |

There was a diversity among the choice of teaching degrees with Early Childhood, Special Education, English as Second Language and High School as chosen destinations. One of the Social Science graduates also went on to postgraduate studies in Rehabilitation and Counselling.

Table 5: Career destinations of students with (dis)abilities

| | | | | | | | |
|--|----|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| No career | 13 | Still studying at University | 7 | Still studying at TAFE | 2 | Teaching | 3 |
| Human Services | 2 | Finance | 1 | Finance Management Counselling | 1 | University Lecturer | 1 |
| Industrial Relations Dispute Resolution | 1 | Remedial Massage | 1 | Senior Workplace Educator | 1 | Occupational Rehabilitation | 1 |
| Administration | 1 | Public Service | 1 | Welfare Worker | 1 | Local Council | 1 |

65.8% (n=25) of this cohort had either gained employment or were still studying. Among those who did not pursue a career were people who were unable to enter the workforce due to the severity of their condition. One student with Muscular Dystrophy, for example, was content to complete a B. Arts and provide a good educational role model for her son.

Change of habitus

The survey included the question: “Did completing OFP change your life in any way? If so, how?” Four former students did not answer this question. Another three answered “No” (only 16/350 answered “No” to this question), but one of the three qualified her answer by saying “No. I didn’t finish a degree as it was long distance learning in SA. I became a Mum of four, studied part time at TAFE and now have my own business. I still study”. Of the remaining 31 former students, their answers fell into the broad categories of “embodied” or “educational” change which could also be construed as gaining embodied or

institutionalised cultural capital. The difference between embodied cultural capital and habitus can be explained by the “game” metaphor used by Bourdieu throughout his works. As in a card game, cultural capital would be the tangible advantage of holding the cards in one’s hands, something that had particular outcomes or benefits; as distinct from habitus which is knowing how to play the game or having a feeling for it (Gaddis, 2013, p. 2). The educational credentials that allowed people to enter careers equates with the acquisition of institutionalised cultural capital; whereas their habitus is the state of becoming a “fish in water”, another of Bourdieu’s metaphors (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127), who feels comfortable and secure in their current location or, as Bourdieu describes, does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world around itself for granted. This new habitus that resulted from these students’ educational journey was expressed in various ways which all had a similar theme: acceptance of their new situation and confidence in their position within it.

One student with agoraphobia reported that she had been confined to her house for over thirty years. Her therapist had suggested she do the course as a means of easing her back into the public domain. As a result she was able to complete an undergraduate degree in Social Science and enrol in an Honours degree where she was researching the issue of Australia’s National Disability Insurance Scheme. The student with Multiple Sclerosis had been an Australian Federal Police officer with onerous duties in the drug squad. When injured at work, the ‘Force’ promised to look after him, but did not fulfil that commitment. His return to study was a means of retraining in a Business degree in order to establish a new career, as well as providing social connections. This student became an advocate for other disability students at the university and was instrumental in compelling the university to provide disabled access to a number of buildings on campus that were previously inaccessible. The student with severe arthritis felt she was on the ‘scrap heap’ but found a love of philosophy led to a temporary new career.

Table 6: Embodied and institutionalised cultural capital resulting from completing OFP

| Embodied change | Educational (institutional) change |
|---|--|
| “It gave me confidence again in that I liked what I studied.” | “Yes, I’m at Uni studying a Social Science degree and running PASS classes.” |
| “Due to my age, realistically, it has probably changed my life more from a personal sense of self and accomplishment.” | “Yes. I was told, and believed, that if I could do OFP, I could do Uni. OFP was my ‘stepping stone’ to future academic success.” |
| “Yes, it made me realise that I can study and learn, it’s not as scary as I thought.” | “It has changed my life in the way that education does change people’s lives.” |
| “Yes, I felt more confident in myself. Stopped feeling ‘dumb’ and became open to career possibilities... my confidence grew steadily and it was a direct result of undertaking and completing OFP.” | “Yes and no. Yes because it opened my mind to a lot of things that are occurring in society and how things are the way they are. No, because I still have the determination to succeed.” |
| “Yes, I had a different outlook on many aspects.” | “It encouraged me to pursue further study.” |

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| | |
| “I felt more confident in my abilities.” | “I started a Bachelor of Primary Teaching.” |
| “Absolutely. Totally. I learned so much about the world, who I really was, who my real friends were. I had to learn to stand up for myself and speak up. I entered the B. Soc Sci, got a degree, my whole yearly income went from a maximum possible \$32k to \$84k for doing the same work. My whole world changed forever.” | “It enabled me to progress down a path of constant learning (both formal and informal) that helped me re-adjust after feeling that I had been thrown on the ‘scrap heap’ as far as meaningful employment went. It was the best course I ever did, including my degree.” |
| “It gave me more confidence to enter into more conversations with people. In the workplace (theatre) it broadened my knowledge of creative arts.” | “In many ways, yes... it gave me the incentive to go on to complete my studies and further my prospects that I would not have had a chance to do otherwise.” |
| “It opened up my life and allowed me to see that I could do this, even though at times it was a struggle... I graduated with a degree in Soc Sci. I have not been able to get employment with my degree. I am currently at TAFE doing Business Administration and commenced work 2 days a week.” | “I always wanted to teach – it’s been my dream. Now it’s coming true. We were too poor a family, I left school to get work – that’s just how it was. I went on to do Postgraduate Coursework.” “Yes as it enabled enrolment into Occupational Therapy.” |
| “I went to Uni, did 3.5 years of a degree, got special consideration, then deferred. But things had changed so much, I didn’t need to go back and complete it. Friends I thought I had made at Uni were shocked and thought I had wasted it all. Uni let me know that I was as good as, if not better than, most. Getting Ds and HDs was amazing. It gave me confidence that I’d never had. I now work on my own at my own business and am happier than I have ever been.” | “It gave me the tools and the skills to be able to work successfully through the degree. I also am comfortable around the campus because of my time in OFF.” “I have an Honours degree, am half way through a Masters which is something I never thought I’d be able to do.” “It rekindled my obsession with learning.” “I went on to further education, gained confidence.” |
| “Although I did not complete OFF, I changed with the new knowledge.” | “It gave me the courage to go and complete a degree.” |
| “It showed that I could endure another attempt at obtaining a degree, seeing that I made such a mess of my first attempt.” | “Most definitely, the course added to my life in a most positive way. I developed an enduring love of Philosophy... it introduced me to areas of science that I had formerly been quite ignorant of.” |
| “I found out I could achieve a University place and my confidence in myself increased. I wasn’t dumb! I never thought | “This program changed my life in the way I view the world. It also helped me gain extra knowledge about the world and enhanced |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>of myself as dumb but now I knew I could do it. I achieved a place for the next year in a B. Soc Sci... I have recently started a B. Criminology and Criminal Justice. OFP gave me confidence to know I can achieve this. My state of mind is 100% better and I am enjoying what I'm doing. I know I can do it because of my start in OFP and what I learned about academic study."</p> | <p>my writing skills. This course was a great prerequisite to gain entry to my University studies."</p> |
|--|---|

These data show the extent to which acquisition of confidence levels and sense of self-worth were reported as life changing for these students. The student who reported she "stopped feeling dumb", for example, demonstrates the way that habitus opened up occupational choices and created a framework of opportunities that were previously unavailable to her. The internalizing of a habitus that allowed these people to view the world in a different way and gave them courage to change their circumstances also disrupted the notion that "people like us" with disabilities were unable to do so. Their Open Foundation experience was a new socialization, one which, as Reay (1995, p. 356) comments, added another layer to earlier socializations and resulted in outcomes that were quite unexpected, such as that of the student who reported finishing an Honours degree and being half way through a Master's degree at the time of survey. These stories indicate that acquisition of institutionalised cultural capital, in the form of educational experience and qualifications; and embodied cultural capital in the form of confidence, self-worth, and competence both socially and academically led to a changed habitus that significantly altered life choices for these people.

Unpacking deficit thinking

Coping with tertiary study may often be an additional challenge for people who have some kind of disability, and certainly universities must be aware of the need to provide additional cultural capital to assist these students to succeed and to comply with policies relating to equity. However, Smit (2012) refers to uncritical use of the "disadvantage" discourse and argues that when students are framed as "lacking" or "inadequate" in some way, this masks the fact that they also have human potentials that can be realised at both personal and professional levels, as is the case with students who moved into a variety of professional careers. She argues that there needs to be thoughtful consideration of the readiness of higher education institutions to "respond to the diverse student body, and cultivate the will to learn in all our students" (Smit, 2012, p. 378) because a deficit mindset perpetuates stereotypes and alienates those who have a willingness to engage with the educational enterprise. As the Director of a Disabled Students' Program commented: "It's not a deficit in talent; it's a deficit in ability to represent that talent" (Hippolitus cited in Vollman, 2016, p. 14).

Promoting successful and inclusive education is not only a social responsibility, but "can now be found in the policies and plans of universities" (Chenoweth in Clapton, 2009, p. xiii). However, according to Clapton (2009, p. 223) contemporary disability services policies and programs are flawed because they claim inclusion and accessibility where people are

claimed to be “‘in’, while remaining ‘out’”. Students with disabilities are in a precarious position. In Australia, universities are subject to State and Federal equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation. This includes direct discrimination in the form of admission/enrolment; and indirect discrimination where actions unreasonably excludes or disadvantages someone with a disability (University of Newcastle Policy statement 000344). Under such policies, both students and staff have rights and responsibilities to ensure equity of students with disabilities. It might be presumed that the habitus of universities has had to change to accommodate new laws and change the discourse from deficit to equality.

This changed institutional habitus is, in part, a response to litigation. In America, Lee (2014, p. 41) reports that between 2000-10 administrative charges and lawsuits alleging disability discrimination skyrocketed. She concludes that it is likely greater numbers of university students will request and be entitled to accommodations in the future. As new technology emerges Lee expects that universities will find it easier to accommodate certain disorders, but in the meantime, as students with disabilities progressively represent larger populations of university enrolment (Walker, 2016, p. 81), universities must strive to offer equitable support systems.

Support for students with disabilities

One former student in the research commented that when she undertook OFP in the 1980s that lecturing staff were unfamiliar with how to accommodate her hearing impairment and that she did not, at that time, have access to a scribe to take notes which made it difficult for her to keep on top of the work. Her personal resilience and additional reading made it possible to complete the course. Recent research on young adults with disabilities has found that “targeted support could potentially ameliorate the negative impact of becoming disabled” in the early adult years (Emerson et al, 2014, p. 455), so universities’ attention to how this support is implemented is vital. Literature suggests that providing additional resources such as staff development for lecturing and administrative staff may have significant benefits. Research on this issue points to “both the positive impact of disability awareness among university faculty and administration, as well as the importance of making this awareness more widespread” (Walker, 2016, p. 84).

Increasingly, students are accessing university with disabilities that are not easily observed (Couzens et al, 2015). Couzens et al’s Australian study reported that informal networks of support were more effective than institutional supports or lecturers who provided clear instructions, were flexible and caring. This suggests that universities need to turn their attention to the importance of peer networks and social capital as well as other modes of institutional support. The need for an evaluation of support for students suffering mental ill health is discussed in an account of how four Australian Universities undertake mental health and wellbeing support. Crawford et al (2016) argue that the increasing number of students presenting with mental health problems requires urgent attention.

Some final questions

The concept of habitus has proven useful in examining the life changes brought about by pursuing tertiary entry for students with disabilities. In his journal article entitled

“Bourdieu, ‘Habitus’, and Educational research: is it all worth the candle?” Nash (1999, p. 185) poses the questions:

Our core concern must be with causes of social differences in access to education. What is the contribution of family resources, of income, educational knowledge, and social connections...What of the correspondence theory between the system of economic production and the system of educational production?

Nash ends by asking “As for Bourdieu: is it all worth the candle?” His answer: the struggle to work with Bourdieu’s concepts “is worthwhile, just because to do so forces one to think. Without concepts – the tools of thought – we will not make much progress”.

In the case of students with a (dis)ability it is certainly worth holding up that candle to see that they can, and do, succeed despite some of the tremendous challenges they face. These stories demonstrate that for many, they have the capacity to live productive lives if offered the chance of further education. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 134) habitus is transformed by the structuring and restructuring of people’s dispositions as a result of their educational experiences. Nash (2002, p. 28) argues that students who want to be educated “possess an effective habitus that generates practices in accordance with that desire”. But rather than the potential for habitus to be a dominating force or a means of conferring symbolic violence (as argued in some interpretations of Bourdieu’s reproduction theory) this paper is arguing that it can be liberating and transformative.

But, as Reay (2004, p. 435) argues “Choices inscribed in the habitus are limited... bounded by a framework of opportunities and constraints... it makes some possibilities inconceivable others improbable and a limited range acceptable.” Open Foundation creates a space for students with (dis)abilities to realise their potential and restructure their habitus making choices available to them. And, to their credit, universities are responding and changing their habitus by attempting to find new and innovative ways to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. As the outcomes of the students in this research show, it is worth the effort.

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