Narratives of widening participation and why problematising recurring dilemmas may matter

Dr Iain Jones
Newman University, Birmingham
SRHE Access and Widening Participation Network
3 May 2018
- Tensions and debates in the framing of widening participation policies and practices.

- How 15 policy actors constructed *different narratives* of widening participation, of their organisation or institution, and their own places within these organisational stories.

- Widening participation and transition not simply ‘problems’ to be managed but a set of recurring and complex dilemmas to be problematised.
Explanatory typology derived from a re-construction of narratives

Inter-relationships between ‘restricted’- ‘reformist’ and ‘extended’ narratives of widening participation matter

Why? Contested interpretations of what widening participation is- was and could be (Jones, 2017)
Significance and possibilities of ‘extended’ small-m metanarratives’?

A narrative that has power to *re-frame* and *reconstruct* policy—despite complexity and uncertainty of an issue (van Eeten, 2007).

Exploration of ‘how we are living in the midst of our stories’ (Caine et al, 2013, p.576) and ‘a felt dissatisfaction with an existing situation that proves difficult to change alone’ (Smith, 2010, p.57)

‘Small-m metanarratives’? Those policy narratives recognising differences in a controversy then working towards ‘way of making sense of an issue’ (Garvin and Eyles, 1997:48; Hampton, 2004)
Ways of making sense of experiences and ‘problem’?

It begins with some issues, concerns or problems that are real for people. These guide the direction of inquiry.

**Miller (1995) ‘The autobiography of the question’**

An autobiographical approach …how the relations between theory and practice are understood and (if they are) productive (Miller, 1995:26)

**Smith (2006) Notions of ‘entry’ and ‘standpoint’**

Institutional ethnography begins by locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which it will be explored.
The research ‘problem’?
Constructing the ‘story of the question’ (Miller, 1995:24)

What was my ‘entry’ point?

- Apparent ‘policy amnesia’ or lack of institutional policy memory about different possibilities of widening participation.

- Policy framing: Policies and practices of widening participation defined—parameters of policies reduced—to particular national and institutional practices.

- Marginalisation—or even exclusion—of other possibilities of widening participation.
The study analysed and interpreted complex inter-relationships *between* national and institutional policies and practices.

In particular, study asked how widening participation interpreted in national and institutional policy texts and by national and institutional policy actors within a *specific political era* between 2004 and 2014.
Summary of methods: 2013-2017

- 15 semi-structured interviews (March 2014-January 2015)
  - Seven national policy actors
  - Eight institutional policy actors

- Recurring analysis of policy texts
  - Four national policy texts 2013-15
  - Two institutional policy texts 2013-15

- Research diary (From Feb 2014- Feb 2017)
Why narratives of policy and practice?

**Narratives?** Analysis and interpretation of how ‘a specific story…corresponds with the broader set of values and priorities of a discourse’ (Sutton, 1999:7).

**My stance?** Follows Ball (2013): Contrast between narratives representing policy as clear and fixed compared with other interpretations of policy as contested and in flux.

**Tension** between conception of policy narratives underpinning and stabilising policymaking with those flash points where policy narratives are critiqued
Why narratives and institutional ethnography?

- **Disjuncture.** Slade: an institutional ethnography (IE) begins with a ‘disjuncture’ (2012:462) between lived experiences and wider social processes.

- **Stories and narratives** Taber (2010) traces how these relate to organisational policies and practices *but also* relations outside of the institution too. Walby (2013) emphasises this connection.

- **A purpose of interviews in an IE?** To learn
  - what individuals *do*
  - how they work with texts
  - how they may be regulated through the organisational processes in question‘ (2013:143): how their locations within the institution, and beyond, may affect their individual standpoints.
Dilemmas in framing widening participation

Are discourses and narratives of widening participation contradictory *and* contested?

Implications for teaching and learning?

What are contested narratives of policy and practice?
Implications of typology? Interviews and ‘restricted’ and ‘reformist’ narratives of widening participation

Narratives? Tensions between ‘fixing’ a narrative-compared with narratives in flux

- ‘Restricted’ narratives:
  - Emphasised ‘stability’ and ‘compliance’
  - Combined with framing of specific notions of ‘marketisation’ and ‘support’ within an institution (What present and absent from narratives)

- ‘Reformist’ narratives:
  - Critiqued implications of compliance
  - Memories of texts- and narratives- shaped thinking and practices by ‘working around the edges’ of ‘restricted’ narratives and ‘finding other spaces’ for sustaining & developing specific practices
National policy actors: ‘Restricted’ narratives of stability, control and compliance

- Dominant narratives of widening participation combined importance of measurement with a normative value of partnerships‘ and (seeking) stability.
- Particular notions of responsibility and how to allocate expenditure.
- ‘Student success‘ framed by combining it with an implicit reference to ‘the student lifecycle‘ and retention.
- Assertion: ‘Widening participation is a partnership with a whole host of stakeholders‘.

Differences of power within partnership not considered
‘Reformist’ narratives of policy: How momentum of one enactment of national policy marginalised and disrupted another

....why was it then that Access to HE continued to plough its own furrow, as it were, apparently with very little relationship to all of that other activity in Aim Higher, and so on?

That was, I think, to do with the simple fact that actually the government policy was directed to increasing the progression rate from school leavers, so all of the policy stuff was written in terms of school leavers....

That then made it very difficult to put an argument that said, ‘and adults, too’. I think there was immense frustration in the FE sector
What widening participation was – is- and could be? 'a rather clumsy and potentially pejorative phrase‘?

“I don’t like the phrase ‘widening participation’. I understand (again) its motivations. Its motives. So the first thing to say about what it means is that it is not a very (erm) attractive phrase” (Interview: November 2014).

- Powerful condemnation of a particular form of widening participation.
- This critique and memory of particular forms of aspiration raising is significant
- Why? Represents what (for many) is the dominant narrative of widening participation and not an interpretation of the phrase.
Contesting ‘deficit’

how do we raise this view of students as a deficit- when actually many of these students have a fantastic range of experience which we need to capture in positive and constructive ways?

To do that I think you have got to have a different model of the relationship between the institution and the students
From restricted’ and ‘reformist’ narratives to a starting point for ‘extended meta-narratives’?

Not about individuals or groups adapting to institutions or the incorporation of individuals into the cultures of an institution. May offer entry or new starting point (Smith, 2006) in re-viewing or re-framing teaching practices and curriculum within institution.

Following case study provides an entry point for exploring these questions.
Students as Partners (2014-18)
Why did students and lecturers get involved?

- Students’ perception? Limitations of cultural diversity within curriculum: content, resources
- Students wanted to create a project based on ‘enriching’ the curriculum
- Learn and experience new ways to ‘enrich’ the curriculum
- Work collaboratively together
Three methods chosen by students

- Questionnaire – 55 participants
- Semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers
- Two focus groups with students
Findings and recommendations

- Review library stock
- Review opportunities to contribute to curriculum development
- Themes and topics threaded throughout modules
- Expertise of staff needs to broaden
- Review classroom environment and layout
The contestations are about what can be said and thought about higher education, who can speak, when, where and with what authority, and about who has the power to translate argument and policy into practice and to determine the shape, size and access to higher education (Davies, Williams and Webb, 1997 in Williams (ed), 1997:1).
Research on contested narratives and teaching and learning practices

Why inter-relationships matter for widening participation?

The question of Access must be inverted: it is not only a question of access into universities. It is also a question of access of universities into the knowledge of those excluded (Shanahan, 1997:71).


