

## **Students as Producers of Knowledge: A Popular Education Workshop**

*Joint event of the Society for Research into Higher Education's (SRHE) Student Experience Network and the British Sociological Association's (BSA) Researching Students Study Group hosted by the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick*

Tuesday February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007, 11 am – 3 pm.

This free event was booked out with the Reinvention Centre full as our regular participants were joined by under- and postgraduates from Warwick, de Montfort, UCE, Surrey and Greenwich universities. Patrick welcomed everyone to the event and Cath Lambert explained the Reinvention Centre's purpose of embedding student research in the undergraduate curriculum.

Participants then drew labels from a hat and argued about where we all stood in a long line from 'Vice Chancellor' to 'cleaner' and 'contract researcher'!

We then followed the method of popular education by breaking into five pre-allocated groups. These were motivated by undergraduates from Greenwich, Central England and Warwick to address the central question of what we understood by 'students as producers'? In sharing our ideas this notion was redefined into one of learners as active participants in a transformative process of reflective learning opposed to the more usual notion of students as reproducers of knowledge.

Each group also addressed and fed back on its own question starting with the similarity of students as reproducers to students as consumers of commodified knowledge. By contrast, productive, purposeful, experiential, contextual, practical and theoretic knowledge was seen in a process of creative engagement not amenable to measurement as 'output' and with profound impact upon conventional methods of teaching and learning in which teachers are also reproducers of knowledge covering the same courses every year. What students perceive as useful knowledge varies with context. For instance, how does a student produce knowledge in the classroom – when do you ask a question/ share your thoughts/ say what you think to risk being labeled 'disruptive'? Product or outcome was compared with the process of creation, not restricting 'readers' of 'work' to assessors but collaborating in a community of knowledge and practice for process-based assessment. So is sufficient justification of 'knowledge for its own sake' that you never know when it might turn into 'useful knowledge'?

The pedagogic possibilities of these and other questions were then discussed after lunch when Joyce Canaan introduced Paolo Friere's and Miles Horton's ideas of popular education to pose the question of their relevance for contemporary HE. She said that emancipatory knowledge fundamentally linked to practice was needed now more than ever since the world was 'in a complete mess' due to neoliberal globalization.

We then broke into new groups to discuss whether HE can contribute to popular education by affording a communicative space or meeting ground for otherwise isolated communities, or is HE an 'unpopular education'? Is an organic relation possible or are students totally instrumentalised? How can academic instrumentalism be combined not only with vocational relevance but popular education? In Latin America there is currently a dialogue between universities and mass popular movements for which the recuperation of their own history is key. 'Academic activism' is thus able to empower itself through more widely pervasive processes of popular education that are empowering others. In the current absence of such movements and organizations in the UK who should lead such processes? Should they not be student-led, through NUS perhaps?

The Reinvention Centre's Mike Neary summed up with reference to the intellectual derivation of the concept of student as producer from an article written in the 1930s by Walter Benjamin on 'The Artist as Producer'. In this article Benjamin talked about rethinking the role of artists as central rather than peripheral to the progressive development of the social world. Mike suggested we think about university students in a similar way, and encourage them to actively participate in the production of what Benjamin referred to in his article as 'authentic knowledge'.

General discussion over a glass of wine followed with a vote of thanks to the Centre for all their efforts, especially Cath Lambert but also Sam for picking us up from the station in the Centre's van and Elizabeth for the photos (if you can soon, please Elizabeth!).

Events arising from this event could include a spot at the Discourse, Power, Resistance conference at Man Met Uni on 27<sup>th</sup> March from 11.30 and the Reinvention Centre's own conference on September 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> on 'The Student as Producer: Reinventing the Undergraduate Curriculum'.

The next joint meeting of the SRHE SEN and BSA RSSG will be in April at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference at the University of East London when the Researching Students panel will continue last year's debate on whether there is one student experience or many with papers from Mary Evans, Shirin Housee, Mark Weyers and Patrick on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April from 9 - 11. Joyce, Matthew Badcock and Wes Shumar have another panel that might be of interest to SRHE SEN and BSA RSSG members on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April 11:30 - 1:00.

We will then have a day event in June at SRHE HQ in London probably on this question of 'Unpopular (Higher) Education' (recalling the title of a 1970s book on schools).

NUS is holding a 'Great Higher Education Funding Debate' in London on 21<sup>st</sup> March with Claire Callender and Patrick Ainley speaking among others.

Notices of other meetings that members of this list may be interested in are also attached. In particular, Ben Marks of Opinionpanel research is offering £100 for opinion pieces on the opinionpanel website – join Esmee Hannah and Nicholas Barr in making your opinion known (see attached).

PA 18/2/07.