

3 Events

[Art, Design and Media Network Meeting, Swansea Metropolitan University \(SMU\)](#)

// Network meetings bring together colleagues from across the subject community of art design and media to inspire and stimulate dialogue, generate ideas and discuss collaborative developments.

Around sixty people participated in the SMU meeting held on 7 March 2008 which opened with an introduction by Professor Andrea Liggins, Dean of the Faculty of Art and Design at SMU. This was followed by presentations from Professor Brian Griffiths, University of Chester, Professor John Wood, Goldsmiths College, Julia Lockheart, WritingPAD Project, also based at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Antonia Walker, ArtsWork Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) located at Bath Spa University, Linda Ball, University of Arts, London and Jo Walters from SMU who co-ordinated the event.

Topics covered were a proposed ADM-HEA 'Welsh Project' led by SMU, employability and enterprise and the variety of policies and initiatives shaping the future of art, design and media education such as Writing and Metadesign; how writing can be used to encourage the ethical design practitioner. There was also an update on work done by the WritingPAD project and the Journal of Writing in Creative Practice.

There was a palpable sense of enthusiasm throughout the day with people expressing positive feedback and the wish to extend discussions. It was great to meet representatives, particularly newly appointed staff, from South Wales universities.

This was one of a series of successful events held over the past year, however, to ensure the continuing success of these events, we need your active involvement. We would appreciate your input, and particularly welcome suggestions for future topics that you consider of interest to the community or proposals for interesting workshops and presentations.

We have posted presentations and a report by Amy Salisbury, Projects Officer Wales at the Higher Education Academy on the SMU meeting on our website at: <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk>

[Media and the Environment at MeCCSA 2008](#)

// Over 250 delegates from around the world received a warm welcome from the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, who hosted the 2008 MeCCSA conference in January.

The Cardiff MeCCSA team are to be congratulated for choosing the theme of media and environmental politics, drawing much-needed attention to climate change as an issue for debate in media and cultural studies as well as a challenge for the sustainability of institutional practices in higher education. The conference theme was reflected in two of the keynote speeches, delivered by environmental journalist and activist George Monbiot and Professor Toby Miller, University of California, Riverside. Monbiot identified the need for journalists to engage with the issue of climate change from a scientifically informed perspective. Miller highlighted the lack of engagement within media and cultural studies regarding the enormous environmental impact associated with the production and consumption of information and communication technologies. The topic of the environment and the media received further critical attention in a dedicated panel. These contributions clearly signalled the growing need for the incorporation of environmental concerns within academic research, curriculum development and teaching practice.

As in the past, the conference programme offered a wide range of topics such as impartiality and journalism, media and terrorism, digital storytelling, media and popular culture, framing the visual, as well as sound and music. The organisers were keen to stress the growing integration of media theory and practice as artificial boundaries continue to be broken down. Practice-based work was not only screened and exhibited throughout the conference, but also discussed in various panels. Questions concerning practice-based research for pedagogy and the

impact of teaching and funding initiatives within the vocational/industrial sector upon universities were considered. Reflections on teaching practices particularly in relation to the digital environment also found a platform for discussion at MeCCSA.

MeCCSA conferences offer a particularly collegial environment for British and international media, communication and cultural studies scholars. This year was no exception. Cardiff added its own flair with a wine reception at the Senedd, the new Welsh Assembly building. Here, the presentation of prizes for the winners of the ADM-HEA and poster session competitions found an impressive backdrop. The Senedd itself constitutes an example of environmentally aware architecture, thus communicating a positive and inspiring vision for the future.

Julie Doyle and Irmi Karl, University of Brighton

4 Features

Widening Participation and the Media Student Experience

[The first ADM-HEA Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Prize was presented to Angela Devas, a senior lecturer at Thames Valley University, at the MeCCSA annual conference held in Cardiff earlier this year. The prize was awarded for the best paper analysing key issues impacting on media, communications and cultural studies higher education. Angela's paper, selected by a peer review process, examines the experiences of non-traditional learners applying the analytical methods of Cultural Studies to educational inequalities in higher education.](#)

[We are delighted to present the winning essay here.](#)

Introduction

Inequality is a persistent feature of higher education in the UK; the government drive to widen participation has seen an increase in numbers attending university from the highest socio-economic groups and continuing low levels of participation from the lowest (Gilchrist et al, 2003). Nearly 90% of social class I participate in higher education, while for social class V this is 5%. There has also been a bifurcation in the university system, with 'old', pre-1992 universities attracting white middle-class entrants (Read et al, 2003), and 'new' universities, often former polytechnics, providing an environment that is more welcoming to non-traditional students who continue on into higher education (Reay et al, 2005).

This study centres on the experiences of students studying film, photography and media courses at a post 1992 university in London. As a lecturer in film and media, I was struck by the pedagogic disparity of teaching about inequality in cultural practices, institutions and media texts (see Subject Benchmark Statement for Communication, Film Media and Cultural Studies 2002), and a failure to consider these inequalities as experienced by the students studying them. Many of the students I have taught have made long and difficult journeys to come to university and I wanted to examine these experiences using the theoretical tools available in my own discipline. Cultural Studies, from its inception, has been concerned with the conjunction between culture and agency, and has also considered issues of education (see Willis, 1977). This study also eschews the psychologist, positivist version of learning in favour of an approach which attends to issues of structure, such as class, race and gender, and which also contests notions of a fixed and rational subjectivity (see Malcolm and Zukas, 2001). To this end, I turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others in this area seeking to theorise educational inequality in higher education. >>



Professor Stuart Laing presented Angela Devas with her award

This is a qualitative study using a semi-structured interview technique. 55 students were interviewed over approximately five weeks. The students spoke very openly; the relationship of interviewer to their respondents will necessarily produce different results (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005). 33 students were white, 17 were black, and the rest were Asian, Chinese or unknown. 14 of all the students had experienced most of their primary and secondary education outside the UK, either because they were from the European Union or because they had settled here. Virtually none of the non-British educated students were paying international fees. 28 were female and 27 were male.

Theory

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that education acts as a site of reproduction for vested class interests. Bourdieu's analysis of class rests on the concept of cultural capital, that is, a set of cultural attitudes and tastes that are acquired through upbringing in a particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital may also be obtained via education, but in a more arduous fashion. Cultural capital is linked to class position, but does not necessarily equate to financial capital, although it may often be part of a circuit of exchange. Cultural capital ensures the reproduction of class interests; education is a key site for ensuring and reproducing middle-class privilege (Grenfell and Justin, 1998). Education thus becomes a site of symbolic violence, which is:

The imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups of classes in a way that they are experienced as legitimate. (Jenkins, 2002, p.104)

Cultural capital is manifested not only in individuals but is also manifest in practices, activities and institutions (Reay et al, 2005).

The concept of habitus refers to the actions and dispositions of agents; ways of behaving and acting which are embodied and learned from social and cultural milieu. Habitus is not a scripted set of rules but a set of acquired competencies that are manifested both bodily and socially and correspond to how individuals place themselves in relation to others. The power of habitus comes from its implicit normalisation of hierarchical systems of privilege. The notion of institutional habitus is used by Reay et al (2005) to consider the broad range of practices, histories and expectations held within an institution and which also link the institution to other aspects of the society in which it is located. Students flourish where there is an institutional habitus that corresponds with their own habitus.

This study sets out to examine how students studying media and related subjects experience the institutional habitus of the university; it investigates how the habitus of the students fits that of the institution.

Method

There are many ways in which indicators of inequality can be addressed; this study focuses on issues of class, while not completely ignoring race, gender, disability and so on. It is not possible, within the confines of this study, to consider all potential areas of difference so for the purpose of clarity class

is used as the dominant paradigm in the research. Class is measured not just as an economic factor, but also as a process (Skeggs, 2004, Reay et al, 2005). Subjects inhabit particular classed situations not only by reason of their economic classifications but also because of how they are positioned by their cultural capital. Agents also position themselves, although structural impositions curtail their freedom to do this, although these barriers may not be self-evident. This study does not attempt to prescribe an essentialised notion of class, but uses this concept to determine different types of habitus; intra-class differences are also considered (see Read et al, 2003).

Findings
Doing media studies

Students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to choose new subjects such as media as they may appear more accessible and relevant (Reay et al, 2005). Media and film theory, however, is often far from accessible. The discursive apparatus around film as a cultural practice is derived from a middle-class habitus. Barker and Mathijs (2005) discuss students' 'vernacular knowledge' of films – conceptual understandings which students initially bring to the study of film, and which may subsequently be challenged by other, theoretical approaches. I would argue however that students bring with them vernacular *knowledges*. For middle-class students there is often a gap between academic premises on which the study of film is based, and their own notions of discernment in the discussion of film. Barker and Mathijs' pedagogic premise is to make the students aware of such a gap. Middle-class students may indicate a preference for a particular director or type of film, for example, Tarantino or art cinema, which signifies a distancing from a more common, or plebeian taste (see Bourdieu, 1984). Awareness of film as an accomplishment of a social practice is already instilled in the middle-class student. By virtue of their habitus, such students are equipped with these practices, and furthermore, they are able effortlessly to reproduce these knowledges as a particular functionality of the verbal display which is called for in the classroom:

I really enjoy the group tutorials... where people are voicing their opinions, communicating, challenging...everybody getting involved and enjoying learning and debating these things (Perseus, white British, intermediate middle-class)

Perseus is aware of the match between his wish to voice his opinions and the desired discourse of the seminar room. Reay (2001) maintains that the process of higher education is often inimical to working-class subjectivities; she uses the example of a student who compares the interview as 'a conversation around a dinner table in like a real upper-class, middle-class family' (quoted in Reay, 2001, p.339). This institutional habitus meshes well with academic expectations (see Devas, forthcoming) so even on a degree course with a very high proportion of working-class students, the discourse of seminars, comprising not only the language, but a set of structured beliefs, understandings and behaviours, remains outside the remit of a working-class lifeworld; it is not only that these students experience 'feelings of disjunction in relation to the academic stance' (Bufton, 2003, p.220) but the working-class affinities of the students do not map on to academic expectations geared to middle-class cultural capital:

...if you're studying something there's always going to be certain aspects that you don't like about it and I just thought it was because it wasn't relevant to what I want to do in life...*The Moving Image* I didn't see the relevance of it, just watching loads of old, old films, it was really boring. (Bayo, British African, working-class)

Bayo does not 'see the relevance' – he does not place 'old, old films' in a hierarchy of consumption, and his unwillingness to watch them situates him as without the necessary disposition to engage with 'old films' and betrays his lack of cultural capital. Moreover, his notion of instrumentality and film, its lack of 'relevance' to his future life situates him outside the notion of the bourgeois aesthetic, the cultivation of good taste (Bourdieu,1984). In disciplines such as media and film, the refinement of ideas rests on a comprehension of the importance of the disinterested academic gaze.

Many of the students speak of the way studying media or film has changed them; Suki for example says 'I'm suddenly aware of all these kind of codes that are involved in life...and I find myself analysing things probably a little bit too much now...' (Suki, white British, intermediate middle-class), a sentiment that is echoed by many other students. Many of the students adhere to a notion of distortion or manipulation: 'even if it's just pointing a camera at someone...you're going to have to edit it...and that can distort things' (Albert, white British, intermediate middle-class), or:

I'm Turkish and I go to Turkey and I see their news and you see the massive difference and how they put a twist on it...the techniques they teach us is [sic] how to trick other people, the viewers (Mert, white Turkish, intermediate middle-class)

One student picks up the low status conferred on Media Studies by the media itself (see Barker, 2001, Geraghty, 2002)

Right wing media is a load of old bull to be honest, because they say a lot of bad stuff [about] media students and film student, attacking us... I'm talking about the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*. (Weng, British Chinese, working-class)

Nikisha, (and others) are dismissive of media theory:

I think most of it is just common sense...somebody decided to pick up pen and paper and write about it and say this is my theory...you can interpret what you see on TV...you don't need someone else's theory to tell you that. (Nikisha, black British, working-class)

Nikisha draws on a discourse of anti-intellectualism, a belief in a proto-positivist epistemology that can name what it sees. Many students struggle with aspects of media theory; Nikisha is able to articulate a position that resonates with a belief in the obvious and a rejection of the obscure (see Bourdieu, 1984); the practical is accorded importance:

almost like they're trying to get that sort of theory stuff out of the way so that we can get all knowledged up about it...and then they can start doing the real stuff in the second and third years. (Akon, white British, middle-class)

Practice and theory often form an uneasy partnership in media studies (see Thornham and O'Sullivan, 2004, and Devas, forthcoming.), and Akon's comments highlight this divide. Theory may be seen as instrumental in understanding film, as a way of improving practice:

I can't watch films the way I used to, I always sit down and tear them apart, dissecting them...how it was edited, how many cameras they might have had...wow that's brilliant...how could I recreate that, or how could I improve on it. (Pierce, white British, middle-class)

Thornham and O'Sullivan discuss Lindahl Elliot's contention that theory and practice form a divide which 'is actually *constitutive* of pedagogic practices in the field' (op cit p.723, emphasis in the original). In other words, the pedagogy of media and film rests upon an assumption of this division. Students are often enticed to the university by the mixture of theory and practice – Albert (white British, intermediate middle-class) said he 'was advised that that's sort of ideal for getting into the industry' and this sentiment is reiterated by many other students. There is little sense of an integrated understanding of the relationship between theory and practice among the students; it is either dismissed outright or seen as a necessary evil.

Writing is often perceived to be problematic 'writing in general, theory, it's just too much hard work' (Dyshawn, black British, working-class). Read et al (2003) probe the unequal power relations between students and the academic establishment; the writing of essays requires a particularly difficult set of academic competencies which are often not explicitly taught to students. It is often 'non-traditional' students who are most vulnerable; there is a divergence between the institutional habitus of the university, with a set of expectations around academic literacy, and a working-class habitus which does not provide the smooth transition to academia experienced by more middle-class students. Bufton (2003) argues that working-class students may experience a disjunction between academic language and their own dispositions, which often requires an uncomfortable distance between themselves and the academic stance they are required to adopt; this disjunction may be particularly acute in writing for academia.

Teaching

Notions of good teaching for the students often centre on individual tutors; occasionally specific practices are mentioned, such as summarising the lecture in bullet points, or going into detail about a theory without assuming the students already know it, but overwhelmingly the students understand good teaching to be about tutors being approachable, as well as having enthusiasm for their subject. Approachability often means being able to contact the tutor through email, or get further feedback on an essay. Students call teachers, or certain teaching styles, 'supportive', 'friendly' 'helpful' and so on. The importance of good personal relations with tutors is stressed in the work of Thomas (2002). Not all the students find the lecturers helpful. In one group, Aneisha (who has poor attendance) and Malik accuse the tutors of having favourites (disagreeing as to whether it was the quiet students or the loud ones). This view is actively challenged by Suki, Vanessa and Raine:>>

“Students with the advantage of a middle-class habitus...are most able to use this ‘partnership’ model of learning, as are self-confident students...who have solid family support. The tutors respond to this model of studenthood.”

I kind of feel you actually might, you will get a better mark if you talk to the tutor and get involved and...maybe get some help from them. (Suki, white British, intermediate middle-class)

Punctuality and attendance, I think that plays a big factor in how the teacher or lecturers see you or perceive you because, if you’re always late, then they might jump to the conclusion, oh, if they can’t be bothered, why should I be bothered with them?...If you’re not there, how do you expect them to help you...so get to uni. (Vanessa, black British, working-class)

I totally agree...the whole respect thing as well, you know if you’re not going to be at class, at least let them know...I know they’re getting paid but they’re also trying to help you pass and get a good degree. I don’t know whether it’s my upbringing as well because my dad’s always said... if you’re going to be late, you make sure you tell them. (Raine, black Australian, middle-class)

Raine, Vanessa and Suki represent themselves as good students, turning up on time and valuing their teacher as a partner in their education. Vanessa and Raine treat the teachers as equals, with ‘respect’, knowing how to get the best out of them. Raine in particular draws on an established social and cultural practice of good manners and is thus fully able to insert herself into the discursive milieu of her lecturers, locating herself within the same parameter of good taste and middle-class etiquette. Raine emails the lecturer whenever she is unable to attend; ‘...my dad’s always said... if you’re going to be late, you make sure you tell them.’

Raine and Vanessa also understand impression management – they are able to see how the lecturers might perceive them, as well as comprehending how their attitude and comportment will have a bearing on how they are treated by the tutors. Raine’s awareness may have evolved through a keen determination to succeed at university as a mature student, having previously dropped out. She also has the backing of her middle-class parents. Vanessa is working-class and during the interview she presented herself as a ‘lively, vivacious student with good body language’ (extract from field notes). Vanessa’s mother has encouraged Vanessa throughout her education. Students with the advantage of a middle-class habitus, such as Raine, are most able to use this ‘partnership’ model of learning, as are self-confident students such as Vanessa who have solid family support. The tutors respond to this model of studenthood; students who do not subscribe to this model are often implicitly marginalized (see Devas, forthcoming).

Some mature students, such as Mona and Deena (both black and working-class) seem lost in the system and are less able to make the university work for them (see Reay, 2003). Mona complains about a lecturer:

I answered him back, which I know I shouldn’t have done, but then as Nasir [her co-interviewee] said, we pay our money, we shouldn’t...stand for that. (Mona, black British, working-class, mature student)

Nasir and Mona’s framing of the situation is a recourse to an infantilising justification followed by a consumerist strategy ‘we pay our money’; neither of these approaches give them clearer way of managing their discontent, and both dropped out of that module. Read et al (2003) argue

that students are increasingly using a discourse of consumerism to position themselves as having ‘greater power and centrality in the academic arena’ (Read et al, 2003, p.274) but this discourse fails to challenge either funding inequalities or the dominant structures of the institution. As Skeggs (2004) demonstrates, the discourse of consumerism both legitimates and conceals profound social inequality.

Students without the capacity to access this partnership model with their tutors are not able to benefit from what help is available – Deena praises a tutor for his accessibility and for urging the students to get in touch but she adds ‘[I] haven’t really taken that advice’. Later on she says:

I was trying to get in contact with the main module course leader, I think that person that designs the course and so on. He’s not really got back to me and I’m not too sure why and I’ve made quite a few attempts to contact this person. (Deena, black British, working-class, mature student)

Deena has little sense of entitlement, she does not view the tutor as an equal and she struggles to get help:

I’ve actually come to a place where I’ve preferred a certain subject to everything else and I’m wondering...should I major more in this? (Deena, black British, working-class, mature student)

Deena lacks the self actualising schema that would allow her to complain effectively if the tutor does not respond. This inability to access such help as is available is a threnody throughout her interview, and where help has been provided, such as a computer to help with her recently diagnosed dyslexia, she says ‘by God’s grace...things are a lot easier’. There is a sense of passivity, allowing things to (not) happen that does not correspond to a bourgeois habitus. This is not a question of personality, which of course will influence how an individual will behave in any given situation, but a structural commentary on the presence or absence of a self-realising agency.

Many of the students talk about the difficulties of working on their own, particularly for some of them in the transition from first to second year ‘you have to be shown the right way...there has to be a teacher behind you.’ (Karen, white British, working-class). Maris wanted ‘more detail about the work’ (Maris, dual heritage, middle-class) and Delia (white British, working-class) says she appreciates the tutors are trying to get them to work on their own but she would like ‘more of a gentle shove now and again as to what you should be doing’ and Tosin (black British working-class) says ‘sometimes I don’t feel I understand what’s going on.’ The theory courses are often particularly problematic:

When I get home, I realise I’ve got this work to do but it’s kind of hard to get going...especially some of the subjects when...they are heavy theory based. (Delia, white British, working-class)

“They link the idea of a ‘lean and mean’ pedagogy to the reduced resources available to higher education institutions and where the idea of the independent learner can become particularly attractive as a way of cutting the cost of teaching”.

Read et al (2003) argue that the notion of independent learning is based on an ethnocentric masculinist ideal of a ‘traditional’ student unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty, or the need for support. (Read et al, 2003: p272)

They link the idea of a ‘lean-and-mean’ pedagogy to the reduced resources available to higher education institutions and where the idea of the independent learner can become particularly attractive as a way of cutting the cost of teaching. This model of independent learning only serves to marginalize further those students for whom academia is already an alien environment.

Conclusion

This study paints a somewhat bleak picture of the experiences of students at one, post 1992, higher education institution studying media and related subjects. It is difficult to know how far this is replicated in other universities. This research rejects the conventional pedagogies of learning and teaching, arguing that such practices often serve to disguise and reinforce profound inequalities in higher education; the pedagogy of media studies should be about understanding, exposing and changing such inequalities.

The author would like to thank all the students who participated in the study.

References

Barker, M. (2001) ‘On the Problems of Being a Trendy Travesty’, pp 202-224 in M Barker & J Petley (eds) *III Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* 2nd edn Routledge, London.

Barker, M, & E Mathijs (2005) ‘Understanding Vernacular Experiences of Film in an Academic Environment’ *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* v4, n1, pp. 49-71.

Bourdieu, P. & J-C Passeron (1990/1977) 2nd ed. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Sage, London.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Buften, S. (2003) ‘The Lifeworld of the University Student: Habitus and Social Class’ *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, v 34, n2, pp. 207-234.

Devas, A. (forthcoming) ‘Widening Participation from an Academic Perspective’.

Geraghty, C. (2002), Doing Media Studies’ Reflections on an Unruly Discipline’ *Art, Design and Media in Higher Education*, n1, v1, pp. 25-36.

Gilchrist, R, D Phillips & A Ross (2003) ‘Participation and Potential Participation in UK Higher Education’ in L Archer, M. Hutchings & A. Ross *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion* Routledge Falmer, London & New York.

Grenfell, M. & D. Justin (1998) *Bourdieu and Education: Acts of Practical Theory*, Routledge Falmer, Abingdon.

Malcolm, J. & M. Zukas ‘Bridging Pedagogic Gaps: Conceptual Discontinuities in Higher Education’ *Teaching in Higher Education* v 6, n 1, pp. 33-42.

Read, B, L. Archer & C. Leathwood (2003) ‘Challenging Cultures’ Student Conceptions of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Isolation’ at a Post-1992 University’ *Studies in Higher Education*, v 28, n 3.

Reay, D (2001) ‘Finding or Losing yourself? Working-class Relationships to Education’ *Journal of Education Policy*, v 16, n 4, pp. 333-346.

Reay, D, M. E. David & S. Ball (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Class, Race, Gender and Higher Education*, Trentham Books, Stirling.

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*. Routledge, London & New York.

Subject Benchmark Statement for Communication, Media Film and Cultural Studies Benchmark Statement (2002). <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/default.asp> Accessed 04/12/2007.

Thomas, L. (2002) ‘Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Institutional Habitus’ *Journal of Education Policy*, v17, n4, pp. 423-442.

Thornham, S. & T. O’Sullivan (2004) ‘Chasing the Real: ‘Employability’ and the Media Studies Curriculum’ *Media, Culture and Society*, v26, n5, pp. 717-736.

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Boys get Working-Class Jobs*, Saxon House, London.

Winn, S. (2002) ‘Student Motivation: A Socio-economic Perspective: *Studies in Higher Education*, v 27, n 4, pp. 445-457. •