



EDITORIAL

Patient praxis: A dialogue between equity practice and research

Matthew Bunn* and Matt Lumb

University of Newcastle, Australia

This Special Issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* (ISWP) features papers authored by participants from the 2018 national Writing Program for Equity and Widening Participation Practitioners convened by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle. In taking up the guest editorship of this Issue, we have thoroughly appreciated engaging with passionate higher education practitioners from across Australia who have worked with significant effort and focus to publish from their unique perspectives. The authors of these papers carefully unpack and interrogate equity and widening participation policies, practices and personal experiences, to make situated and contextualised contributions to the field. It is a credit to both the participants and the programmers that this Special Issue is possible, given the intentionally challenging character of a project that productively unsettles the conventions of processes of knowledge creation in Australian higher education (HE).

In editing this Issue we have also taken a slightly unconventional approach. Moving towards a dialogic guest editorship, we have engaged directly via phone, videoconference and email numerous times with each of the authors, getting to know something of their institutional context and doing our best to try and understand how and why the topics on which they have chosen to publish hold meaning to them and their work. This has been an encouraging experience for us and tends towards the claim that equity and widening participation research and practice in this country are being increasingly brought into generative tension. As Burke (2018) notes, efforts to reimagine equity through praxis offer “time and space to rethink and to reconstruct the discourses that shape what we do and how we do it and with what effects” (p. 13). This intentional fusion of research and practice is at the core of the program’s purpose, being also a central concern of CEEHE; attempting to stimulate new ways of imagining and doing equity and widening participation in HE through bringing practice into conversation with the rich insights emerging from more critical theories of social justice. In this editorial we first provide a short overview of the programmatic foundation from which the Special Issue papers have developed, as a way of contextualising their contribution to the field of equity in higher education in Australia. We then move on to discuss the processes, politics and possibilities of writing from unconventional positions, drawing on our own experiences as well as critical literature.

The 2018 writing program

The national writing program for equity and widening participation practitioners commenced in Australia in 2017, having developed in parallel to and collaboration with a UK initiative with

academics from Sheffield Hallam University and supported by the UK Office for Fair Access. The program from which these Special Issue papers emerged was facilitated throughout 2018 by CEEHE, directed by Professor Penny Jane Burke, convened by Dr Anna Bennett and supported by Ms Belinda Munn, as participants from across the nation gathered at workshops in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle. Operating from pedagogical principles that also guide the ongoing development of CEEHE, namely critical, feminist and Freirean perspectives and commitments, the workshops and mentoring which comprise the main structures of the program are designed as a facilitative framework from which practitioner-researchers build a project of their own making. Whilst called a ‘writing program’, it is evident that both participants and programmers see the time together as generating much more than words on pages. During our conversations with authors in preparing this Issue, it is clear that the pedagogical spaces co-constructed across 2018 as part of the program resulted in rich exchanges, shifts in perspectives, and valued relationships. People spoke of important dissemination beyond this journal, including institutional documents such as strategies and reports, personal applications for promotion and awards, and as a platform of advocacy for further resources to develop new initiatives. It is unsurprising to see a range of different outcomes from this initiative as the participants’ own contexts, interrelationships, values and rationales shaped the generation of new ‘impacts’ in relation to their involvement with the writing program. This understanding – that the outcomes and impacts of initiatives cannot easily be projected nor generalised across contexts – is an important consideration in the ongoing debates regarding evaluation of equity oriented activities (Burke & Lumb, 2018). Tellingly, this Special Issue of ISWP extends this debate with contributions taking up evaluative perspectives (Hattam & Bilic, van Zanen, etc.) that acknowledge the situated and specific dimensions of knowledge claims about the value of programmatic efforts.

The writing program is a unique initiative in the Australian HE landscape; bringing together passionate people from across the country over time to produce new understandings and perspectives via a personal project embedded in and emerging from practical contexts. The program enjoys support from two associations that are important players in relation to equity of access to and success in and beyond higher education participation in Australia. *EPHEA* is the association for Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia and *NAEEA* is the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia. We recognise the strong support of these two associations, not only because it helps make the program possible, but because it is via collective efforts that advocacy for new approaches to practice-enhanced research and research-enhanced practice can be made. Whilst the machinations of the program might appear ‘straightforward’ when described, there is of course at play a complex of underlying dynamics relating to questions of authority, legitimacy and power, playing out in a ‘post-truth’ contemporary set of socio-political conditions. It is to these considerations and the way they intersect the writing program that we now turn.

Patient praxis

CEEHE fosters dialogue across the sector by drawing on the notion of ‘praxis’, an approach that brings theory and practice together in cycles of reflection and action. The dialogic relationship between critical reflection and critical action is reflected in the collaborative and participatory ways of working that CEEHE encourages. The term praxis has a long and contested history. Scholars and philosophers including Aristotle, Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu have used the term to denote a form of informed cultural-doing (Allsup, 2003). The national writing program borrows explicitly from CEEHE’s use of the notion of praxis, drawing on work by Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire, who saw praxis as involving cycles of critical action-reflection and reflection-action directed at the structures to be transformed (Freire, 1970). This directly informs

CEEHE's efforts to open up spaces for optimistic criticality around questions of who has the right to higher education (Burke, 2012). Yet an important question is how the writing program specifically navigates the complexities of this approach.

Praxis-based pursuits have begun to represent the possibility for me (Matt L) of an important process of active and academically-inclined 'waiting'. I feel uncomfortable writing this term though, wanting to have already commenced unpacking and defending my meaning here, because I acknowledge that *waiting* does commonly hold a dominant contemporary connotation of passivity or inefficiency. In this context, however, I refer to an active and vibrant process. Increasingly, we are being coerced towards 'evidence-based' efforts in education, including pressure to measure the impact of equity practice. Evidence-based models have been critiqued as embedded in objectifying, paternalistic and/or colonising technologies that construct 'the disadvantaged' in pathologising ways (Mirza, 2015) and which regulate and discipline our imaginations (Burke, 2012). Ibañez Tirado's (2019) analysis of how people in a southern Tajikistan town conceive of waiting can help us to consider how the methodology of the writing program appears to create a space for active reflection, dialogue and recognition, relating to questions practitioners bring to the program; questions that might seem to exist 'out there' in the field of equity and widening participation but that we carry with us in our daily practices that make durable (and, arguably, often inequitable) our education systems. Looking at the *waiting for/to* as a form of temporality that actively entails important practices, Ibañez Tirado (2019) suggests that "waiting figures prominently in Guliston's people's production of their village as a lively and dynamic space at the centre of a circulation of care" (p. 316). The relationship to time here is being reframed in a way that better recognises the possibility of waiting for/to as constituting "an active attempt to realize a collectively imagined future" (Kwon, 2015, cited in Ibañez Tirado, 2019, p. 316). This relationship to time acknowledges that while the future might be 'wicked' (Tutton, 2016), in terms of being *difficult to do something with*, if we are able to escape the overly individualised notions of agency that often drive policy imaginaries in education (Bunn & Lumb, 2019) then different possibilities of educational being, knowing and doing, edge into view.

In 2019, we have both been directly involved in co-convening the writing program workshops. These tend to run over two days and it is striking in each of these gatherings, the intensity with which people experience a spatio-temporal shift, as they navigate to Newcastle from all over the country and then enter into an intense yet productive 'pause' that sits in relation to the hyper-active state of their practical context. It is not easy. While enormous consideration is given to the pedagogical space (Burke, 2017), the opportunity to 'dig' into historically produced practice is unsettling. This is a form of waiting for/to that reflects perhaps the difficulty of apprehending the structures of our realities and the tension of approaching limit-situations (Freire, 1972) to do the reimagining we advocate is required if social inequalities and their consequences are to be engaged. If our goal is indeed more equitable, socially just, educational worlds however, this is our responsibility as relatively privileged actors in our various fields.

Critique and practice in academia – a fine balance

In dealing directly with social justice for access and opportunity within HE, it seems fitting to consider the contribution that academia has made to our understanding of problems of inequality and equity, how these might be ameliorated, and the difficulty of undertaking this process. The concern with social justice has largely been concentrated within the social sciences, and has figured prominently through classical writing early in the industrial era, such as the work of Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin, through to the current era of writers such as Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu. Philosophies of social justice are of course prominent in the philosophy of education,

with figures such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire producing works that continue to influence understandings of equity and social justice thinking, research and practice.

It was this heritage that lured me (Matt B) toward academia. Rigorous, meticulous research and analysis and conceptualisation represented a way to understand *why* inequality happened, and *how* we could challenge its production and reproduction. One of the most powerful elements of this intellectual journey was the opportunity to continue to examine the conditions of the world – through the phenomenological to the structural – to try and understand how things came to be what they are, why they are not another way, and what other ways are or could be possible. Yet, this also requires a ‘radical doubt’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 235), aimed at critically examining all aspects of the social world with an eye toward understanding if, and how, they contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. This can be at times a disenchanting experience, as it requires turning a critical gaze toward even the things central to a sense of meaning and identity. In turning this gaze toward academia and intellectualism, there is no shortage of opportunities to contemplate the production of elitism, domination and inequality.

Academia (in particular) offers a surprisingly narrow opportunity to claim epistemological authority. Academia legitimates some forms of knowledge but at the sake of others, and those without legitimacy tend to correspond with communities without access to economic and symbolic forms of power. Yet, these processes are also steadily revealed by critical intellectuals *from within*. Academia (and, indeed, education more broadly) has been revealed through research (for instance, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977) to be as much a site of social closure as it is the dispassionate pursuit of new knowledge. Universities have traditionally played a central role in the preservation of these systems of domination (Bunn, Threadgold, & Burke, 2019, p. 4; Bourdieu, 1996). These start at the point of access (Burke & McManus, 2011), but even in the period of WP policy, extend throughout the experience and outcomes of study (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018; Bathmaker et al., 2016). There is a tendency for academia to reflect the white, patriarchal upper classes of the Global North, buried as it is within the historical struggles that have built the academia we know today. As has been shown by critical scholarship, academia, constructed as bestowing better rewards on the ‘most deserving’ (Burke, 2012; Bunn, Threadgold, & Burke, 2019) locks out the working class (Reay, 2018), non-white ethnicities (Bhopal, 2015), and women (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). These exclusionary practices can usually be understood through intersectional analyses (Mirza, 2018; Gagnon, 2018) whereby multiple embodied categories of this marginalisation are practiced, and so, beyond the more vulgar or blunt portrayals of privilege, these forms take place in tacit day-to-day acts that demean and ‘shame’ (Burke, 2017) students who do not fit the normative HE culture. Hence, students who belong to so-called ‘equity groups’ are those who come from lineages that have traditionally been denied access to the benefits of HE. Indeed, these groups were locked out precisely because these benefits *were not meant for them*.

However, while critical scrutiny of HE should continue to reveal these processes, this should not serve as a total condemnation of the value of academic contributions. Notably, in the period of post-truth politics (Burke & Carolissen, 2018; Read, 2018) and the ongoing desire to *discredit* academic accounts that are counter to dominant interests, the careful and rigorous pursuit of knowledge, and the sensitivity and reflexivity required in its communication is something that must be defended. Expertise that *confronts* systems of power – whether it is in defence of democracy, of those who are marginalised by dominant groups, or the collapsing environment – is routinely attacked in an effort to delegitimise these claims. Indeed, the rise of populism is arguably emerging from a cultural, social and political global elite who feel that their ‘historically privileged’ status is being eroded (Read, 2018, p. 594). The arguments coming from

conservative quarters often rely on the almost caricatured university-based intellectual, claiming superior wisdom/insight/knowledge from high within the ivory tower. Yet although much of the populist argument relies on a claim of intellectual ‘censorship’ and ‘political-correctness’, “a strand of this anti-intellectualism involves a form of ‘anti-rationalism’: a resistance and refutation of challenges to the right’s beliefs by academically rigorous empirical inquiry and the intellectual ‘pursuit of truth’” (Read, 2018, pp. 594-595). While there is an occasionally problematic alignment between the arguments against the academy coming from the right and left (see Read, 2018; Clarke & Newman, 2017), it is nevertheless revealing of the potential for counter-hegemonic power held by academic claims to epistemological authority.

As has been shown in endless examples, though most notably in various works on climate change (Jacques, Dunlap, & Freeman, 2008; Hamilton, 2007), academics willing to be epistemologically courageous have seen incredible smear campaigns in the deliberate effort to destroy their credibility. It thus continues to demonstrate their fundamental importance to efforts towards social justice. We must, therefore, constantly and reflexively tread a fine line that navigates between the preservation of systems of power, and the preservation of knowledges that can erode these systems of power. In this context, one of the extremely difficult processes that is overlooked and understated in academia is the careful positioning of one’s work. While there is a constant push to make authoritative claims, we cannot *overstate* what can be gleaned. Academic writing conforms to a very narrow band of expectations: subtle, yet authoritative; substantiated, yet novel. You can *intervene*, but that intervention cannot be radically separate from the field: it must be intelligible to peers, and to experts and leaders of the field as a valid, if not valuable claim to knowledge. Yet these claims are as much embedded in writing style and technique – from learning what to include and omit, and what claims should be implied and what must be made explicit – as they are in any properly epistemological basis. A common struggle then, is coming to terms with the symbolic power of academic discourse while maintaining a critical, reflexive understanding of the way in which these claims exclude and include different cultures and knowledges.

The writing program aims to ensure that these processes are not unproblematically reproduced, but works with participants to think about ways forward that allow for thoughtful critique of the systems that sustain inequality. The aim and hope of this approach is to ensure that equity practice also accounts for the complex and durable character of inequality, and is *struggled with*, and challenged, so that equity work can be a powerful tool in the construction of a better system of doing higher education in the service of social justice.

The papers

HE institutions commonly promote their credentials when it comes to equitable practice, often couched in language and discourse of inclusivity and belonging, as new initiatives are celebrated with gusto. Efforts to really engage questions of equity are, however, regularly treated within HE institutions as something separate from its ‘core business’, often located at the peripheries of institutions (Burke, 2012). Academic excellence, ranking prestige, and particular framings of quality are largely the demonstrable priority of institutions, driven by a wider and increasingly globalised league-table imperative. In this context, equity issues and response are compartmentalised, broken off into respective areas of people who specialise in a given issue. Falconer takes this concern up as a problem that institutional policy and practice must address. If equitable practice is not made fundamental to HE institutions, across policy, teaching and research/evaluation, it is unlikely to ever offer a meaningful pathway to reach parity of participation. Through her review of institutional equity strategy literature she demonstrates that to produce successful strategies for developing parity of participation, equity must be taken

deeply into the core leadership values and structures of an institution.

Without taking such steps, a polarised view of equity prevails. This positions 'equity groups' as the *other* in higher education, meaning that they are not simply free to attend university being who they are, but instead must work on themselves to mimic, or even fully embody, the normative culture of the institution. This is a culture that is often, at least in parts, foreign. For example, the deeply classed culture of a university is one that requires students from 'equity groups' to continually prove their worthiness to be at university (Bunn, Threadgold, & Burke, 2019; Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018). Skeggs (2004) aptly summarises the famous sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of class, when she reflects that "Bourdieu distinguishes between those who only have to *be what they are* as opposed to those who *are what they do*" (p. 19, emphasis in original). In HE, students from underrepresented backgrounds will regularly feel that they must justify themselves, as they are not afforded the *ease* of being at home within a familiar cultural setting. As Rooney shows, students with disability, despite a rhetoric of inclusion, regularly feel as if they are not part of what is considered 'normal' for a student in HE. Despite regularly having positive and empowering experiences through working with a disability services team, this experience quickly evaporates when having to engage with the normative culture of the broader institution. Rooney shows that students with disability routinely face the need to justify themselves as worthy of inclusion in HE, notably to academic staff. Indeed, this work shows that experiences of academic staff are highly variable, likely attributable to the different interests, approaches and dispositions of the academics themselves, rather than a university-wide effort to ensure a culture and pedagogy of inclusion.

Willans' contribution to this Special Issue provides a sophisticated insight into the difficulty many students will face in navigating HE 'inclusion'. Drawing on borderland Discourses, Willans analyses the contradictions and ambiguities relating to the ways in which institutional expectations of studenthood interact with ongoing identity formation negotiated by enabling students at the threshold of undergraduate study. Via a thorough engagement and analysis of students voicing their perspectives on participation in a pre-university enabling program, Willans demonstrates the importance of articulating what is meant by supportive learning environments in HE. Moreover, in a period given to the rampant vocationalisation of the value of a university education, it is crucial to consider whether equity in HE is about more than just giving underrepresented people additional qualifications for the instrumental pursuit of work. Rather, education *in itself* represents an opportunity for empowerment. Hattam and Bilic's paper demonstrates that there is far more at stake, and for many women who have faced personal crises, trauma and violence, enabling education is more than a mere 'pathway' into formal HE study. Rather, it can offer a life-changing and transformative opportunity. Hattam and Bilic demonstrate that the social justice opportunities that HE offers are not isolated to the teleological pursuit of a better life, but extends to the immediate empowerment possible with supportive teaching and pedagogy.

The difficult possibility of HE playing a transformative role in relation to social inequality in Australia is no more evident than in contexts of university outreach. Two papers in this Special Issue engage differently and directly with the tensions and opportunities that this form of 'equity practice' affords. van Zanen explores the contemporary relevance of a longstanding resource in the field of equity and widening participation outreach in Australia – the DEMO (Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach) produced in 2010 by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Gale et al., 2010) – when considering outreach initiatives engaging mature age students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds in higher education. Through this analysis, a clear and important theme emerges regarding the importance of spending time to

understand the surrounding conditions of equity initiatives; the fundamental need to contextualise program design, implementation and evaluation. The contribution by Poretti builds on these ideas while shifting the focus to regional access and participation, a growing policy and practice concern in Australia. Foregrounding the importance of principles of practice, Poretti considers questions relating to distance, cost, academic achievement, and motivations, in relation to regional and remote outreach efforts, specifically identifying challenges of scope and scale. As identified by Halsey (2018), access to formal educational structures in and from regional, rural and remote contexts is a multi-faceted challenge that needs to be approached carefully and respectfully. Poretti demonstrates the sort of critical stance championed by the praxis-based framework of the writing program in her conclusion that “regional outreach must move away from the dominant model of school and cohort based to a more flexible approach that demonstrates awareness of the communities we are engaging with and the people who call them home”.

In addition to some important acknowledgements below, we now invite you to engage with these papers directly, and to consider their implications for your own contexts of practice. For within each, there are methodological insights applicable across contexts. By this we do not mean to advocate for generalisability of methods or models, or ‘scaling up’ of interventions. Instead, we want to recognise how these papers help us to think about the importance of foregrounding the values and commitments of those involved in efforts to better ensure underrepresented groups enjoy improved access to high quality educational opportunities. We want to celebrate the efforts these authors have made in developing a contribution by negotiating the practitioner-researcher nexus, but also to highlight the ways in which this Special Issue reminds us of the importance of interrogating and constantly reconstructing the methodologies guiding equity and widening participation policy, practice, research and evaluation in Australian higher education.

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