

Creating SoTL communities through critical storytelling: reflections on a participatory study with Russell Group academics of working-class heritage

Abstract

While the lives of academics of working-class heritage (WCH) are an increasing source of inquiry, few studies exist which mobilise participatory approaches situating the participants as co-producers of knowledge about their own lived experiences.

This proceedings paper discusses a participatory study with eight Russell Group university academics located in the UK. The study mobilised critical storytelling methods to challenge a narrow range of stereotypes which typically represent academics of WCH in deficit tropes (Brook and Michell, 2012; Morley, 2021). In sharing and questioning their stories, an inquiry space emerged to co-produce knowledge aimed at expanding the possibilities of understanding what it means to identify as an academic of WCH. Working collectively with the emergent narrative data, the participants created composite stories representing the diverse, rich complexities of being/becoming an academic of WCH. Aimed at students of WCH considering, or in postgraduate study, the academic and non-academic outputs seek to communicate that academia is a place where people like them exist.

The study aligns with pedagogic approaches aimed at providing under-represented social groups with inquiry spaces to co-produce knowledge as part of community development approaches to counter forms of epistemic injustice. The participants shared, critiqued and analysed their lived experiences to comprehend how wider social and cultural factors shaped them. Through this dialogic and reflexive process, a “Third Voice” emerged from contrasting perspectives, producing new understandings of self and shared experiences (Goodson and Gill, 2011: 79). The interrogative process was marked by emotional dissonance, as participants revisited and reconfigured their lived experiences in the presence of each other. In line with the concept of critical hope (Bozalek, Carolissen and Leibowitz, 2014), the participants collectively worked through despair and discomfort to counter reductive caricatures of academics of WCH through stories celebrating the contributions they, and others, have made to academia and beyond.

Based on the outcomes of the study to date, the authors consider possibilities for this approach to create SoTL communities through forms of narrative participatory inquiry. Through a series of reflective prompts, audience members are asked to contribute thoughts and questions to generate dialogue aimed at developing the approach further.

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Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of studies about academics of working-class heritage (WCH) by people identifying as such have done much to celebrate working-class cultures in academia and to highlight forms of injustice felt by them (Binns, 2019; Crew, 2021). There has also been an amplification of calls for positioning academics of WCH as subjects in research about their own lived experiences, rather than the objects of inquiry in the work of more privileged others (see Walkerdine, 2021 and Binns, 2019). At the heart of this work is a concern with representing the rich diversity of cultural wealth academics of WCH bring to academia and the challenges they face. Some observers hope that through this work we can move beyond a limited range of stereotypes representing academics of WCH as figures of despair or heroic champions overcoming adversity in a quest of social mobility (Brook and Michell, 2012; Morley, 2021 and Poole, 2022). Such work confronts hermeneutic injustices constraining the possibilities individuals have to know their own lives, because of a limited stock of representations (Fricker, 2007; Goetze, 2018). Therefore, more needs to be done to involve academics of WCH in generating stories reflecting the cultural heterogeneity of this group of people

This Society of Research in Higher Education (SRHE)-funded study mobilised critical storytelling methods to provide eight Russell Group academics, identifying as being of WCH, with opportunities to position their lives as sites of critique and analysis to generate knowledge about their experiences on their terms (Benmayor, 2012). The participants were offered opportunities to work collectively to author their stories as opposed to having them ventriloquised by more powerful others positioning themselves as “self-appointed speakers-for” underrepresented people (Seers-McCrum, 2020).

Creating a SoTL community

Through a co-production of knowledge approach, the study has pursued the creation of a SoTL community where individuals can create their stories. The participants have collectively taken control of the narrative means of production; often denied to them because their underrepresented status in the Academy is not fully recognised (Walkerdine, 2021). By bringing together participants with different lived experiences, the hope has been that a rich source of symbolic resources would be available to create stories of becoming and being an academic of WCH. The project embodies four recurring themes of a SoTL community; collaboration; professional development; sharing and dissemination; and funding (Tierney, Aidulis, Park and Clark, 2020). The participants have had a space to discuss how their routes into and through academia have shaped their sense of being and becoming an academic of WCH. The stories have produced narrative data the participants have collaboratively analysed and distilled into composite stories representing three main themes (Johnson, Wildy, Shand, 2021). Working in partnership with a student-illustrator, the group are currently developing the following stories to disseminate in an interactive graphic novel format:

1. What is an academic of working-class heritage?
2. Routes into HE (career pathways)

3. Developing epistemic confidence.

The stories aim to communicate to future generations of academics and students of WCH that people like them exist in academia, a middle-class place not designed with them in mind but nevertheless somewhere they can belong (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; Shukie, 2022).

The inquiry space has offered opportunities to consider the cultural wealth of experiences the participants have brought with them, including resilience, adaptability and a willingness to challenge each other as well as established representations of their lived experiences (Yosso, 2005; Crew, 2021). An intimate community with deep connections has formed through the sometimes uncomfortable yet developmental sharing of life's happenings. Working through the despair of having cherished beliefs unsettled to make visible the often-contradictory nature of one's sense of becoming has produced critical hope (Bozalek et al., 2014). At times, the participants have been "broken open ... to relinquish authority in favour of collaboration" and to "find meaning in uncertainty" (Riddell, 2020). Rather than ignoring the discomfort caused by emotional dissonance, the participants have worked with it to create interconnecting stories of becoming an academic of WCH, reflecting the complex fluidity of identity. The study has produced a "Third Voice" formed from contrasting perspectives, producing new understandings of self and shared experiences (Goodson and Gill, 2011: 79). The aim has not been to replace absolutes with new absolutes, but to work with liminal feelings of being betwixt and between contested class boundaries to create new ways of authenticating what it might mean to identify as an academic of WCH (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; Poole, 2021).

Study outcomes to date

At the point this proceedings paper has been written, the project is ongoing, so the outcomes are limited in determining the extent to which the following study aims have been met:

1. to create collaborative opportunities for participants to transform their stories into anonymised composite stories (with possibilities for a variety of media types) for dissemination with wider audiences
2. to identify pedagogic contexts the stories can be used in to empower students of WCH in, or considering, postgraduate studies to see HE as a place for them

Nevertheless, the study has illustrated that significant ethical responsibility is attached to this pedagogic approach, particularly when considering the potential for participants' affective responses. Sharing, interrogating and (re)interpreting life histories requires much emotional work from participants, which has the potential to be critically productive and personally distressing. Therefore, to counter the possibility of disrupting participants' cherished beliefs, forms of compassion must be in place to support participants replace any feelings of lost self they may experience (Boler, 2014). In practical terms, from the outset participants need to be aware that the work may cause emotional dissonance, and that measures have been taken to support any forms of distress they may feel during and after the project. For this study, support measures have included access to a counselling service and

opportunities to discuss the emotional work of the study in sessions. In this sense, the study's ethical dimensions respond relationally to the participants' affective needs.

Next steps

Progress on the study has entered a key stage as the participants work collaboratively with an illustrator to produce their stories. The aim is to layer multimodal artefacts into the two-dimensional stories to amplify the voices in the stories. In tandem with producing the stories, a website is being created to disseminate outcomes from the project and the group are working on a journal article discussing the methodological aspects of the work. The participants are also reflecting on possible applications for the approach in other contexts where under-represented social groups struggle to tell their stories on their terms.

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