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Pathways, diversity and academic skills: Bourdieu and 2nd year VET articulants

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This work in progress investigates academic strategies of students transferring from Vocational Education and Training (VET) directly into second-year university programs. Thus, their first-year university experience occurs within second-year of the planned program. Subsequently, they cannot access first year supports and they miss introductory foundational subjects. Bourdieu provides a theoretical framework for the study and this paper explores Bourdieu's Field Theory and its application to the VET articulants' experience. Having come from competency based education (VET), it is argued these students enter a field (second year of an undergraduate degree) where the rules (such as writing academic essays, analysing texts, referencing conventions) are unknown to them. Lecturers assume they have second year academic skills so the rules of the new game are rarely made explicit. Bourdieu's Field Theory and his notions of habitus and cultural capital are used to consider some of the possible difficulties these students face in their first year at university.

In many universities in Australia, VET articulants who enrol directly into second year as a result of being granted Advanced Standing due to their previous VET studies, do not have access to transition support or introduction to the academic skills of their disciplines despite being in their first year at university. This research suggests that by maintaining the status quo in terms of not addressing the transition and academic needs of these second year students, universities are potentially marginalizing this group. As a framework to this study, this paper uses ideas drawn from Bourdieu to consider the academic transition of VET articulants enrolling directly into second year of an undergraduate degree.

Background

The current situation in Australian HE still tends to accept the traditional view of universities as a meritocracy for the middle classes despite the policies which now require increased participation by previously under-represented groups (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Wheelahan, 2009). This is the "existing social order" and within this some domestic VET articulants may be frustrated in achieving their goal of succeeding in HE. This paper argues that Bourdieu's theories help us to understand why this may be the case. So while universities are prepared to accept that increased participation by non-traditional students is inevitable, through not providing transition support it also seems that they assume these students have the social and cultural capital required to navigate their way successfully through an educational system of which they have little or no knowledge or understanding. However, the literature suggests that while these

students believe their VET studies have prepared them for HE many find that this is far from true (Dickson, 2000). The limited literature available (Dickson, 2000; Cram & Watson, 2008; Brunken & Delly, 2011) also suggests that these non-traditional students face numerous difficulties when they enter HE. Unfortunately they enter university directly into second year well after the necessary introductory skills and disciplinary foundations have been introduced. The system then does not seem to accommodate for the difficulties this may create. There is some evidence to suggest that this is based on the ‘poor cousin’ syndrome where universities have an elitist view of VET education which is then perpetuated by the assumption that if the students are given a place at university, then they should be able to cope with the academic expectations (Savage, 2009; Zepke & Leach, 2007). It appears for some lecturers that “it is easiest ... to stick to their existing assumptions about and expectations of the ‘ideal student’” (Ryan & Carroll, 2005, p. 5) and this seems especially true in relation to students who enrol directly into second year. The assumption that is often made by universities and lecturers is that these students are academically prepared for HE as a result of their previous VET studies. Further compounding the problem is the view that these students have access to the social and cultural capital that allowed knowledge and understanding about HE to be ‘passed on’ to them from other family members. However, increasing numbers of students are the first in their families to attend university - this is certainly true of La Trobe University (Bexley, 2008), the gumtree university where this research is taking place - and thus do not have the social and cultural capital that may help them navigate the HE system (Sellar & Gale, 2011).

Bourdieu

A starting point

As a theoretical framework to this study, Bourdieu’s field theory is used to problematise a situation that appears to have been accepted as non-problematic – students who articulate from VET into HE and enroll directly into second year as a result of their VET studies. By opening pathways from VET directly into the second year of HE programs, rather than addressing social justice issues and redressing inequalities in education in terms of increased participation of low SES students, social inequalities are instead reproduced. It must be noted that Bourdieu’s theories will not be used as the final word but rather as a tool to map and examine a situation and as a catalyst for thought about the nature of the VET articulants’ experience in the second year of HE. As Beilharz (1991) suggests, social theory should not be seen as the end but rather as an “invitation to puzzle through the mess with which modernity confronts us” (p.7). So while Bourdieu’s theories may have had greater relevance in mid-twentieth century France, Australia in the twenty-first century is obviously a different time and place and so Bourdieu is a starting point.

Bourdieu and Bradley

At a time in Australian educational history where universities are striving to implement the Bradley Review’s requirements to increase their numbers of low SES students, the theories of Pierre Bourdieu still have relevance. A considerable amount of Bourdieu’s work argued that education reinforced the dominant social milieu of the time and that the majority of students entering higher education reflected this. He observed that people such as farmers, workers, craftsmen and tradespeople had limited access to

higher education, while the majority of higher education places were occupied by children of the “dominant classes” (Bourdieu, 1973, p.86). Likewise the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR, 2008) observed that, “Australia has not provided equal access to all groups from society” (p.27).

Despite many iterations of Australian government policies aiming to redress such inequalities, Bradley’s observation is cause for concern. In Australia some 50 years on from Bourdieu’s early writings, we find ourselves with an inequitable HE sector which is dominated by students from higher socio-economic groups in a similar way French HE, as observed by Bourdieu, was dominated by students from the social elite. It is argued that HE in Australia (as elsewhere in the world) finds itself in a state of flux where many of its practices are still the same as they were before the massification of HE, despite the fact that the nature of the student cohort has changed with many more non-traditional students entering universities through different pathways and with different levels of academic preparedness. Bourdieu (1974) also observed:

The system can take in an increasingly large number of pupils ... without having to change profoundly, provided that the newcomers are also in possession of the socially acquired aptitudes which the school traditionally demands. On the other hand, it is bound to experience crises (which it will describe as ‘a lowering of standards’) when it takes an increasingly large number of pupils who have not acquired the same mastery as their predecessors of the cultural heritage of their social classes. (p.41)

So while the Bradley Review is seeking to reduce social inequalities and is encouraging the opening of non-traditional pathways into HE, the system itself has failed to accommodate for the diverse student cohort with which it is now faced. University curricula still rely on teaching and assessment practices targeting an ‘ideal’ student who has the social and cultural capital to succeed in HE. There is no doubt then that inequalities will exist for the students who enter HE without the necessary capital to succeed. It may well be that the inequalities do “not require that cultural producers intentionally endeavor to mask or to serve the interests of the dominant” (Wacquant, 1992 in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.106) for those inequalities to exist. Instead it might be that the majority of students come from the dominant social classes and so courses and assessment tasks were targeted at this group, who also had the academic skills to succeed. Now however the dominant group may not be so dominant in that there are increasing numbers of non-dominant students from low SES backgrounds. This appears to be contributing to a dis-equilibrium in HE where the needs of the non-dominant students can no longer be ignored because there are too few of them to worry about, as may have been the case in the past. Bourdieu (1974) observed that education is not necessarily a ‘liberating force’ or ‘a means of increasing social mobility’, instead it can be one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage” (p. 32). Even in Australia just a decade ago, Teese and Polesel (2003) observed that “only the socially most advantaged students are practically guaranteed a place in tertiary education” (p. 172). So in post-Bradley Australia, the increasing numbers of non-dominant students must be acknowledged and their needs addressed so that HE becomes a means through which positive social change can occur.

It seems then that the existing social pattern is evident in a system that has not changed markedly even with massification, despite changes in the social composition of the student cohort. Even with HE's massification, the structures and pedagogies of old remained: lectures and tutorials given by the experts; written assessments using a particular language and approach. While there are some changes creeping into university assessments and classroom approaches (such as group work) the expectation is still that a certain 'academic standard' will be produced by the students in order to succeed. This is judged in terms of the quality of the research done and the scholarly nature of the language used (more often than not it is written language).

The sum parts of the whole

In order to argue that class divisions were perpetuated in both society and in education, Bourdieu developed a theory and terminology that is used here as the basis of this research. A number of Bourdieu's terms are explained before the theory is applied to the situation of the VET articulants.

Field

A field, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) is:

a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants ...by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions." (p. 97)

It is clear from this that all fields differ because the occupants will differ, as will the various powers that influence a particular field and its occupants.

Cultural capital

The positions of the various agents within a field are in part determined by the cultural capital they possess and its relative worth within a given field. Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. The embodied cultural capital exists in the form of "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (p. 47); objectified cultural capital takes its form in objects such as books and paintings; while in its institutionalized state it is seen in educational qualifications. Within the field of HE the most powerful cultural capital is in its institutional form and is that of the academic credentials that are needed in order to gain entry to an educational field. Therefore, an agent with strong academic credentials such as a high ATAR score, should face fewer obstacles entering the HE field and they may be likely to hold a relatively stronger position within that field than someone with a low or no ATAR score. Their position may also be strengthened through the possession of embodied cultural capital which could enhance their ability to meet the expectations of the field.

Habitus

Habitus is important within the field as it can determine how an agent within a field plays the game. According to Bourdieu (1998), habitus is a disposition which results from "the internalization of objective structures and schemes of action which orient the

perception of the situation and the appropriate response” (p. 25). The development of habitus is the result of the social relations that are experienced over time including the important influences of both family and school (Reed-Danahay, 2005) - it is not taught or learnt rather it is inculcated. Thus habitus is evident in a person’s actions, attitudes and perceptions but it is not fixed because it is constantly exposed to influences and experiences that reinforce or modify it – “it is durable but not eternal!” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). However one of the issues with habitus is that because it is a product of the particular social position of the family, when that habitus “comes into contact with a system outside the family” (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 47), such as the HE system, the primary habitus may no longer be useful. Bourdieu (2000) suggests that when this occurs it can lead to a difficulty in “adjusting to the new established order” because the habitus has become “dysfunctional” (p. 161). Consequently, a new habitus must be developed in order to cope with the new situation and while this is possible it is not always automatically successful (Bourdieu, 2000). This may occur when the VET articulants move from one educational sector to another.

Applying Bourdieu’s Field Theory

Entry to the field

For the purpose of this study, the particular field of interest is the second year of an undergraduate degree program at an Australian metropolitan based gumtree university. In the past, entry to the second year of an undergraduate degree program was usually only granted once a student had satisfactorily completed the first year of that undergraduate degree, having previously successfully completed Year 12. So the main type of capital used for entry to the field was students’ previous successful academic results. However, changes to government policy have now led to a situation where that traditional entry route into university and into second year of an undergraduate degree has changed and the capital required for entry to the field is varied. Students can use their previous VET studies as capital to enter the field (Year 2 of an undergraduate degree). Hence, among the various players in this field are the ex-Year 12 students and the VET articulants who completed first year of the undergraduate degree. For not all VET articulants are necessarily the same either but rather some receive more credit and advanced standing than others who have completed different VET programs. As a consequence of having completed the first year, these VET articulants have been informed of the rules of the game – success will be judged on the basis of the mastery of particular academic skills. In this second year field VET articulants who completed first year of their undergraduate degree at university overlap with the ex- Year 12 students and have a relatively strong position within second year. It is argued that this stronger position is the result of their first year experience which introduced them to their discipline and to the university’s academic culture – the rules of the game.

Position and habitus – second year VET articulants

In contrast to their counterparts who enrol into Year 1, the VET articulants who enrol directly into second year do not have a strong position due to their entry into the field occurring through a non-traditional pathway. This creation of a non-traditional pathway has been hard fought to ensure their cultural capital (VET studies) is seen as equivalent to a satisfactory ATAR score. However, upon entering the new educational field of second year no one informs them of the new rules of the game and that their success is

not dependent solely on their cultural capital. In fact, their cultural capital provides only a position in the field. However it is their habitus that may well be more significant to their success, because it enables students to generate strategies that can be used to function in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1993). It is the “unconscious” interplay between the habitus and capital within a field that leads to practices and/or our actions (Maton, 2010, p.51).

Consequently, because habitus determines the rules of the game and the players’ communication and interaction (Mutch, 2006), when combined with capital it influences the position of VET articulants, leaving many of them on the sidelines. As the habitus of the VET articulants may differ considerably from the habitus of the ex Year 12 students, each group of players potentially ‘plays the game’ differently. The habitus of the VET articulants appears on face value to put them at a considerable disadvantage in a game which relies heavily on academic preparedness and adherence to set structures of written communication and research – academic writing, referencing styles, acknowledging the work of others, critical reading and thinking. It is argued that the rules the VET articulants need in order to better understand the game of second year university, have been denied them because they by-passed Year one of their undergraduate degree. Year one is where, more often than not, students are given the skills and information they need to successfully position themselves strongly in the first year field. A strong position would be possible if students understood the rules well enough to be able to successfully complete the first year assessment tasks. Yet because the skills required in first year are also required and further developed in second year, a strong position in Year 1 feasibly leads to a strong position in Year 2.

Furthermore it is suggested that because the VET studies took place in a very different field and thus followed a different set of rules and relied on a different habitus, these may no longer be as appropriate in the new field. It is not clear whether the VET articulants are aware that in moving from one field to another, the habitus differs and the old rules may no longer apply to the same extent if at all. Habitus also “ensures that players are able to remain on the field” (Mutch, 2006, p.167) because it provides them with the knowledge of what to do and how to do it. Bourdieu (1993) believes that “through the practical knowledge of the principles of the game that is tacitly required of new entrants, the whole history of the game, the whole past of the game, is present in each act of the game” (p.74). It is proposed that VET articulants know what they have to do – study hard, research, write academically – but they do not necessarily know how to do this because they have not had a history of being involved in the game as played in the new field.

The skills they need have often had their foundations in secondary school (particularly from Years 10 to 12) and have then been refined to focus on university level skills in the first year of an undergraduate degree. Not all VET articulants have completed secondary school and even when they have their educational experiences in VET have not always required the same skills they will need at university because VET has a vocational focus on workplace relevance rather than an academic one. The development of their skills has not been consistent and there may well be gaps. Bourdieu (1971) suggests that it is through schools that culture is transmitted to students and that this occurs in an orderly and “orthodox manner” (p.196) which then becomes accepted as the most appropriate way of providing education. In terms of this research, the culture transmitted is that which is linked to academic endeavours such as academic writing,

abstraction of ideas, wider reading, and the academic culture valued in universities. Bourdieu goes on to argue that a less orderly acquisition of culture “would contrast as sharply with an academic culture as a tangled forest with a formal garden” (Bourdieu, 1971, p.196). Such an analogy seems relevant with the VET articulants’ skills represented in the tangled forest and the formal garden being the ideal expected at university. VET articulants have many of the elements that comprise a formal garden – trees, bushes, branches, even flowers (oral and written language skills, reading skills, study habits, success in competency based assessments) – but when they first arrive at university these are still a tangled mess. Somehow though, they need to take the tangled mess and develop some order to create a formal garden of academic skills. As they have the fundamental elements of the formal garden this enables them to enter the field albeit with limitations. The VET articulants may also be able to stay in the field but what they have to say about their experiences of the game and habitus in terms of the academic coping strategies they use to try and maintain their position in the field, provides food for thought.

Impacts

Because of the previous educational experiences of VET articulants, which might include possible failure to complete secondary school, poor school results and incomplete VET studies, this has implications for the manner in which they approach their university studies. Bourdieu (1971) suggests culture is a “common set of previously assimilated master patterns from which ... an infinite number of individual patterns directly applicable to specific situations are generated” (p. 192). If we relate this to educational culture and VET articulants, because they may not have had the opportunity to develop the “master patterns” of the HE culture they may face problems understanding academic culture and meeting its assessment requirements. Often these assessment requirements seem to rely on previously understood knowledge and behaviours that students bring to their studies, thus enabling them to apply them to their university experience. This knowledge might be writing an academic essay, thinking critically about the literature or acknowledging sources; and behaviours such as seeking help or understanding that the educational culture is in fact different from the one they were in previously. Students who have successfully completed Year 12 often have had experience in developing these master patterns and the development continues in the first year of their degree. They thus become more adept at using and adapting these patterns to the different academic requirements they encounter at university. In contrast the VET articulants do not have the same opportunities to develop “master patterns” because their educational route is somewhat different. They may have very limited knowledge of the academic skills required at university because they were not necessarily required in VET. Instead their “master patterns” were different in nature, relevant in the VET system and valuable in other situations but of limited use in the university setting. As suggested by Bourdieu (1971):

Those whose ‘culture’ ... is the academic culture conveyed by the school have a system of categories of perception, language, thought and appreciation that sets them apart from those whose only training has been through their work. (p.200)

More recently, Cottrell (2001) also notes, “If the university course does not match the way that the feeder courses teach and assess, then the students are often in the dark about how to study” (p. 36). However, this difference in perceptions, language and

thought of VET articulants is often overlooked. Consequently when they arrive at university, it is assumed the VET articulants have the same “master patterns” as the students who have enrolled after successful completion of Year 12 so the university then begins to build on these “master patterns” in the same way for all students. This is where a problem might emerge. Bourdieu (1971) suggests:

It may be assumed that every individual owes to the type of schooling he has received a set of basic, deeply interiorized master-patterns on the basis of which he subsequently acquires other patterns, so that the system of patterns by which his thought is organized owes its specific character not only to the nature of the patterns constituting it but also to the frequency with which these are used and to the level of consciousness at which they operate, these properties being probably connected with the circumstances in which the most fundamental intellectual patterns were acquired. (pp. 192-193)

If the VET articulants have different “master-patterns” from those developed through traditional secondary schooling and in first year of university, then their intellectual patterns may develop differently and be organized differently. The consequence may then be a dissonance between the “master-patterns” of the VET articulants and those developed in and expected by universities. Bourdieu (1993) further suggests that it will be necessary to adjust the habitus to adapt to “new and unforeseen situations” (p.87), as will be the case with the VET articulants, however the ability to adapt will be limited by their habitus. In other words, they will only be able to adapt in as much as they understand their new situation and this understanding can only be based on their previous experiences.

Conclusion

While their cultural capital provides VET articulants with a position in the field of HE, it is more likely that their habitus contributes to their experiences within it. Students articulating through VET to HE may not have completed Year 12 or may have achieved a low ATAR score which did not allow them direct entry from secondary school to university. Consequently they are less academically prepared for university than students with an ATAR sufficiently high to enter university based on this. It should not be assumed that VET studies adequately prepare students for HE as this is not the main aim of many VET courses. One of the major disadvantaging factors for the VET articulants that are the focus of this study, is that they by-pass the first year program of their undergraduate degree. Their previous educational experiences will contribute to their habitus and this can then significantly influence their practice within the new field in which they find themselves.

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