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Student transitions into student representation and governance

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ABSTRACT: Using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* as a tool for analysis, this study explores the experiences of students as they transition into governance and decision-making roles while at university. The paper will seek to understand the experiences of student representatives, and how they adjust to the role of being the student voice in university governance. The analysis is based on interviews with twelve student representatives, operating at two different levels of decision making in one university, five of whom were sabbatical representatives contributing at institutional level, and seven non-sabbatical representatives operating at a faculty level. These differently situated representatives expressed contrasting attitudes about their roles as partners or consumers in decision making. The study will suggest that students see themselves as outsiders who enter a new *subfield* of academic governance within the broader field of higher education. It takes time for them to adjust to their role in this community as they learn the rules and ways of working in the *subfield* of academics. The paper will discuss how on entering the new *subfield*, the students act reflexively to the practices of the community, with an adapted habitus as they become enculturated in the systems of the university.

KEYWORDS: University governance, Student representation, Student voice, Bourdieu

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of students into the decision making processes of universities has grown in the UK over recent decades, to the position where representation is nearly universal (Trowler and Trowler 2010). The growth in representation may come from the need to listen to the "student voice", which Kay et al(2010) suggests is important. It could be argued that the introduction of a new section of four questions on the student voice into the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK (HEFCE 2016) only reinforces the emphasis on listening and responding to students in decision making.

Despite this level of representation, Little et al(2009) report that the effectiveness of the student voice varies considerably at different levels of universities, from the programme, to department and the institution. It is not only the effectiveness that can vary, Klemenčič(2012) notes how the degree of representation can range from simply access to information, to full partnership in institutional decision making. This variety of experience is coupled with a lack of evidence of student engagement in issues beyond their own learning, such as their direct involvement in decision making (Trowler and Trowler 2010).

This paper explores the experiences of student representatives involved in institutional decision making at two different levels, the institution and the faculty. It focuses on the experience of students as they transition into the role of representation, using the social practice theories of Bourdieu(1990) as a theoretical framework.

STUDENT REPRESENTATION

It is argued by Klemenčič(2012) that one of the foundational values of universities in Europe has been the role of students in representation, which can occur at different levels in the

institution, from course level through to university governance. As Trowler and Trowler(2010) report, the role of this representation can range from tokenistic consultation through to full partnership on committees.

The literature would suggest that there are benefits in representation for both the student and the institution. For the student they are introduced to democratic processes in decision making, and have a say in shaping the future of their own education (Lee 1987). While for the institution, it improves the academic product that is being offered (Menon 2005) and creates a more positive operating environment (Wood 1993).

Students have been found to have contrasting experiences as representatives, with both their effectiveness and their contribution to decision making having different outcomes (Menon 2005). Part of this might be attributed to students not understanding how the system works, and as Planas et al(2013) suggests this can contribute to them feeling like consumers who are just passing through the institution. Consequently they do not understand the way the process of decision making, or see the benefit to their participation. This could be as a result of the effectiveness of the transition process into the role of representation.

The contrasting experiences of students may partly arise from the need to be “learning on the job” (Lizzio and Wilson 2009, p81), and as Carey(2011) indicates the need for training of representatives to be able to perform in their role is important to success, a key part of transition. This paper will explore the experiences of students as they transition into representation, using the theoretical framework of social practice, and the specific ideas of Bourdieu to study the process.

SOCIAL PRACTICE

It has been suggested by Nicolini(2012) that social practice is an ever-changing reflection of social life, which tries to capture the actions of real-life practices. In trying to understand the real-life experiences and practices of students as they transition into representation, the social practice theories of Bourdieu(1990) are used. These try to explain practice and understand the way that they are through the three forces of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (Nicolini 2012, p53). It is the interaction of these three forces that shape the social practices of individuals.

The *habitus* is the structured set of dispositions that shape and justify the dispositions of the individual (Costa 2014). The *habitus* interacts with the *field*, which is structured space where there is interaction between social and power positions, an example of a *field* would be higher education. If, in the context of this paper, higher education is a *field*, then the interaction taking place within university governance would be a *subfield*, because this would have its own ways of working which are different from the normal operations of the *field* of learning and teaching. This would fit with Bourdieu and Wacquant(1992), who define a *subfield* as having its own “logic, rules and regularities” (p104). Finally, *capital* relates to anything that can be exchanged, which might be material possessions, or non-material items, such as authority and status.

It is argued that a student, when they transition into representation, will enter as an outsider into the *subfield* of governance, with its established ways of working. They will bring with them a *habitus* which predisposes them to act in certain ways, and a *capital*, that comes from their authority as an elected student representative. This paper will seek to explore this transition, using this social practice perspective.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The following research questions have been informed by this social practice model, and the suggestion of Trowler(2010) that there is a lack of finer-grained studies of student engagement in decision making in universities:

What is the experience of students as they transition into the *subfield* of university governance?

To what extent does the transition into representation vary at different levels within the university?

METHODOLOGY

A medium sized research-led Scottish university was used in this study, with a total of twelve representatives interviewed. These twelve consisted of five sabbatical representatives who operated on a full-time basis at both university and faculty level, being involved in decision making including senate, learning and teaching, quality assurance, programme reviews and student appeals. Seven faculty representatives were also interviewed, who were combining representation with their studies, and involved in faculty boards, and staff:student and learning and teaching committees.

Interviews were conducted towards the end of their year as representatives, to allow the full period of experience to be captured, from their initial transition into representation, to the point where they were considering their transition out of the role. Each interview typically lasted 45 minutes, and were conducted in a single meeting. An informal interview style was adopted, to allow students to raise experiences and issues that were relevant to them rather than impose the agenda of the researcher on their responses.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the text analysed for key themes and concepts. Shared meaning across interviews were compared, and related to the theoretical concepts of social practice proposed by Bourdieu. A range of issues were raised during the interviews, including their experiences of transition, feelings about the role, and their responsibilities. From this analysis several main themes emerged relating to the transition experience, and these are discussed in the next section on the student experience.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The student transitioning into representation would be familiar with the broader *field* of higher education, with the ways of working for lectures, tutorials and examinations, but the *subfield* of governance was a new experience for many of them. They came into governance as an outsider entering into an already established *subfield*, which was not easy as one student identified:

"It was ... confusing because I didn't know where I stood with the whole school"
(female faculty representative #1)

For some of the respondents this sense of being an outsider resulted in feelings of isolation, as they transitioned into the role:

"I kind of sat on my own and it's just full of all the academics and it was quite intimidating."
(female faculty representative #2)

For this one student there was more of a sense of identity later in the year when several students joined her in the committee, and they were all present in the meeting:

“four of us and so we sit together”

(female faculty representative #2)

In helping students to transition into this *subfield* the established academics need to consider how the student feels, and make them feel comfortable and free to contribute to the discussions. If they feel confused and isolated they are not able to be effective in presenting the student voice, and may even hold back in expressing themselves, as one student explained:

“I wouldn’t want to say something unless I felt like I had earned the respect to be able to say something.”

(female faculty representative #1)

The systems for integrating students into representation roles is important to their success, good briefing of representatives before meetings can help them to discuss issues beforehand (Williams and Brennan 2004). This could give them confidence to raise issues, and feel more integrated into the decision making and less of an outsider. Any briefing could also help to clarify the role of the student in decision making, because representatives had conflicting perspectives on their role, as typified in the following quotes:

“I think I’ve got an authority as a paying student at this University to get a good standard of teaching.”

(female faculty representative #2)

“The decision-making process, I was really surprised that the links are so close and that they respect our opinion.”

(female sabbatical representative #3)

What became apparent in the responses from the two groups of students was that their perception of their role was different, with the faculty representative seeing herself as a consumer, whereas the sabbatical student was more of a partner in the decision making, sharing close links with the academics in that setting. This distinction is reflected by Luescher-Mamashela(2013) who found that there can be a variety of motivations for involving students in governance, two of which were consumerist and communitarian. The faculty representative could be seen as someone who is consuming the educational product, and as such is looking to protect her interest. The sabbatical representative is a part of a community, sharing common goals.

The common goals are best reflected in the partnership agreement that exists between the institution and the student body at the university. Signed at the start of their period in office, the agreement establishes priorities for working together between the students and university management. Creating this common document, with shared goals for the coming year, would help the transition for new representatives into their position, and for them to determine their priorities for the year.

The partnership agreement helped the sabbatical students create a positive partnership which shaped their effectiveness in the role. Another factor that influenced their effectiveness was time. As several respondents pointed out, there was a period of learning as they entered the new *subfield*, typified by the following comments:

*“The learning curve goes straight up because you used to think like a student”
(female sabbatical representative #5)*

*“when I say year, it's not really a year, it's nine months, and by the time you've settled in to now, when I know what my actual jobs are, you're already a month and a half, two months in, which is a quite a high percentage of your time.”
(female faculty representative #1)*

The time that is required to transition into the *subfield*, and the time that was then available to influence decision making, was seen to compromise the ability of the students to deliver the promises they made during their election process. The promises they had made, and the policies they had wanted to implement, were being compromised by the time involved in transition. One student talked about the “*nest egg*” projects that they had a vision for, but the limited time meant that it was difficult to put all of these into practice. Several commented that:

*“if I was doing this job for five years I could make a real impact.”
(female sabbatical representative #6)*

Yet there is a balance in being in position longer to be able to make changes, and the democratic voice, giving other students the opportunity to also be involved in the representation. If individuals served for longer periods, as was recognised, this:

*“might not be good for the organisation because there is less democracy in the system.”
(male sabbatical representative #2)*

Which indicates that there is an equilibrium to be found between the time needed to transition into the new *subfield* and being able to influence decision making. The majority of those interviewed had only been in post one year, and although they could see a benefit in serving a second year, because it removes the need for the learning curve at the start, the majority of them were not considering a second year.

Bourdieu would suggest that for anyone moving into a new *subfield*, the transition can create a tension in them between their *habitus* and the need to play the game within the *subfield* (McNay 2001). The interaction between the *habitus* and the *subfield* creates a mismatch, which can cause a reflexive response in practice. One clear example of this occurring in the transition into representation is the use of language, as was noted:

*“I have definitely had to change because academics use academic language. I never thought I would use acronyms so much.”
(male sabbatical representative #2)*

This student demonstrates acquiring the language of the academic through the use of acronyms and then reflecting on how he has changed, shifting his practice to incorporate the language. This shows the tension that can occur as the student transitions into the *subfield*, and the need to respond reflexively to the rules of the game.

CONCLUSIONS

When individuals enter higher education as students they encounter a number of points of transition, one additional transition that some chose to take is to adopt the responsibility of student representation. This requires a transition into a new *subfield* of higher education

which can be very different from their prior experience, which means they encounter a number of new challenges. The university can assist the students in this transition by helping them adjust to the role, briefing them on the responsibilities and including them in decision making at an early stage. In the time when they are preparing to take office the university can work with them to create an agenda for actions they want to pursue, to make their time more effective and reduce the effect of the learning curve.

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