

Are we all adult returners?

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Keywords: adult learning, curriculum development, safe spaces, TEF, dialogic narrative

I am troubled by the infantilisation of learners. This manifests itself in many ways. Safe spaces, the “Prevent agenda” and populist hostility towards lazy lecturers all signal the same issue from different perspectives. There is a risk that current TEF and similar policy led, metrics-driven, curriculum-development initiatives further embed a diminished model of learners and learning. In this session we will work with our experiences of returning to learn (maybe even this one), using a structured sorting technique to test, in discussion, a model of dialogic (synoptic narrative) learning and to confront the necessary problem of modelling, which any curriculum development initiative entails.

I came to academia late: an adult returner. Moving from passion to competence in university teaching has been my journey. A core experience faced by adult returners is named *impostership* by Brookfield and Preskill (2005, 144) but that is only part. This sense of “impostership” is well documented, particularly with regard to “vernacular cosmopolitans”: racially, sexually, economically, politically, mentally, religiously intersected and excluded from the “global cosmopolitanism” of (white, cis-gender/straight, Western, upper middle class) “imagined communities that consist of Silicon Valleys and software campuses” (Bhabha 2006, xi-xiv). The life journeys of working class university students typically include experiences of impostership at particular moments:

This is not the time for a “grown-up conversation”. Return for me has involved, each time, rediscovering a primary lesson. At Ruskin College, in 1986. my students were soldiers just left the services, mothers whose children were grown, laid-off factory workers. The hypothesis I developed was that all learners in post compulsory education are, in essence, adult returners: 18 year old undergraduates and silver surfers; first-in-family or grandfathers-old-school. And, new lecturers on their first PG Cert. In returning to learn, we often seek to argue more effectively for what we already believe and we find our beliefs challenged by new evidence, interpretation, argument, theory, and teaching. The contextual nuances, knowledges and shadows each person brings are unique. The conflicts between democracy, privilege and hierarchy cast deep shadows in post-compulsory education (Montross & Montross 1997). This continues to have practical impact for teaching and learning.

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