Resisting neoliberal policies in UK higher education: Exploring the impact of critical pedagogies on non-traditional students in a post-1992 university

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Abstract
In this article, we focus on how neoliberal performance metrics impact on non-traditional students at a modern university in England. We argue that the introduction of 'quality assurance' measures, (such as the National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework) are driven by an ideology which purports to have student's best interests at heart by raising teaching standards, focusing on graduate employability and wider participation, but in fact works to discourage critical pedagogic practices that would allow for more democratic and dialogic spaces of learning. This article presents findings from one multi-modal qualitative case study at a particular higher education institution in London, where many of the students originate from socially and economically deprived areas and frequently come from ethnic minority groups. We argue that the radical space of the classroom provides a unique opportunity for students to move into collective and empathetic modes of learning that yield both normative measures of 'success' as well as more transformative outcomes. We maintain that critical pedagogies work to disrupt the neoliberal narrative that champions individual success and the student-as-consumer model, and by doing so, helps to redress the persistent inequalities that non-traditional students face in UK higher education settings.

Keywords
Bare pedagogies, equality, neoliberalism, non-traditional students, radical pedagogies, transformation

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Introduction

In a speech given by the UK Prime Minister Theresa May in February of 2018, she tells the students at a further education and adult learning college in Derby that

One of the great social achievements of the last half-century has been the transformation of an academic university education from something enjoyed almost-exclusively by a social elite into something which is open to everyone. But making university truly accessible to young people from every background is not made easier by a funding system which leaves students from the lowest-income households bearing the highest levels of debt, with many graduates left questioning the return they get for their investment. (May, 2018)

If we are to believe the rhetoric of the Prime Minister, social justice and equality in the context of higher education is one of the UK’s greatest achievements, helping increase the social mobility of the ‘have-nots’ in the past 50 years. This noble achievement is somewhat diminished, however, once we take a closer look at what the Conservative Government has actually done to enable this progress. While the Prime Minister is quick to point out the flaws in the funding system, noting the difficulty for low-income households to bear high levels of debt, the fact that the Conservative Government\(^1\) pushed for large fee increases which have resulted in what some would see as exorbitant levels of debt is more than a little ironic. Under a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government following the Browne Review in 2010, tuition fees were raised to £9000 per annum (up from £3000 in 2006), and currently tuition fees are capped at £9250 with nearly 75% of English\(^2\) universities charging the full amount (UCAS, 2018). In the Summer Budget 2015, the Conservative Government announced it would abolish grants meant to help lower income students and replace them with maintenance loans, further increasing the burden of debt for the most deprived students.\(^3\) Theresa May is certainly right in claiming that the funding system makes it much more difficult for socially and economically disadvantaged students to access higher education, but it is the policies of her own government that have helped to create such an unfair system.

Critically, the final line in this excerpt from her speech is perhaps most revealing: with many graduates left questioning the return they get for their investment. Education is presented here as an investment – not a social good. Students who pay such high fees and accrue massive amounts of debt should be guaranteed a ‘good return’ in the same way that any consumer of a service might. This fits with the increasingly neoliberal policies that are guiding UK higher education towards a more market-driven model, shifting education from a public good to a corporate product.

A number of scholars have argued that neoliberal regimes may have a negative impact on student learning. Naidoo and Williams (2015) argue, for example, that marketizing higher education may decrease active learning and deter innovation in teaching practice while Jarvis suggests these changes may cement existing hierarchies and increase the control of universities centrally to meet political agendas (Jarvis, 2014). Saunders notes that marketized education works to depoliticize the classroom and turns students into consumers *par excellence* (Saunders, 2007) and Ball and Olmedo argue that these changes attune teachers to the importance of *imposed* success measures, rather than care for students or emphasizing real learning (Ball and Olmedo, 2013). We argue that these impacts are evident in the wider higher education sector in England, but critically, suggest that these new regulatory mechanisms have a disproportionate impact on non-traditional students at non-elite institutions. Giroux and Giroux argue that critical pedagogies are facing a crisis as neoliberalism continues to impact the very foundations of education itself, and suggest current policies are ‘grounded in the now commonsense belief that education should be divorced from politics and that politics should be removed from the imperatives of democracy’ (Giroux and Giroux 2006: 21).
We echo this concern and argue that critical pedagogies (still) offer the possibility of a radical counter-narrative that allows for the hegemony of neoliberal narratives to be disrupted. Indeed, we suggest that for non-traditional students at lower tier universities (in the United Kingdom), the impact of using critical pedagogies in the classroom – including politicized, non-hierarchical, dialogic modes of teaching – are far more likely to result in transformative learning experiences for students beyond simplistic performance measures and constitute a more meaningful ‘good return’. Further, we maintain that neoliberal approaches to higher education undermine and devalue the importance of essential critical skills, suggesting that despite claims from politicians who champion social mobility, that the success of these non-traditional students, particularly those who chose to go to a non-elite institution, is not a pressing issue for those who develop and regulate higher education policy.

The neoliberal university

In her discussion on neoliberal ideologies and their impacts on global higher education, Kathleen Lynch (2006) provides a useful definition of neoliberalism which we adopt for the purpose of this article:

> Neo-liberalism offers a market view of citizenship that is generally antithetical to rights, especially to state-guaranteed rights... The citizen is defined as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest. There is a glorification of the ‘consumer citizen’, construed as willing, resourced and capable of making market-led choices. In this new market state, the individual (rather than the nation) is held responsible for her or his own well-being. (p. 1)

An obvious solution to helping students from deprived backgrounds would be to lower fees or introduce means-tested grants or bursaries, but we suggest this doesn’t fit with the increasingly marketized approach that champions the ‘consumer-citizen’ model Lynch highlights above; as such in order to better protect the ‘investments’ that student-consumers make when attending university, instruments of governance that have been used in the private sector have been introduced as a way of monitoring outcomes and evaluating performance. Jarvis (2014: 155) argues that an increased focus on ‘quality assurance’ has ‘become an increasingly dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education’. Collini (2012: 17) suggests ‘Vice-chancellors now keep as nervous an eye on league tables as do football managers’ and the increased proliferation of University League Tables and Student Satisfaction Surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) have grown in importance in the United Kingdom over the past two decades; both of these instruments seek to quantify ‘success’ in ways that mirror neoliberal ideologies.

Higher education and widening participation in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom in 1992, a number of polytechnic and further education institutions (termed ‘modern universities’ as a way to contrast them with older, more elite institutions) were given University status by the then Conservative Government leading to an end of the ‘binary divide’, which suggested that a university education was the prerogative of a chosen few. When New Labour were elected into power in 1997 they introduced a ‘widening participation agenda’ which sought to expand higher education provision to students who would not normally attend university – particularly students from ethnic minority backgrounds and those from socially and economically deprived areas. New Labour sought to encourage more non-traditional students into higher
education, and the ‘Widening Participation’ agenda would have a profound effect on the landscape of UK higher education.

Modern universities were seen as a key space to help facilitate the expansion of higher education provision, and many offered lower entry tariffs and a wide range of more vocational subjects (e.g. social work, nursing, midwifery) that were thought to be more appealing to non-traditional students. Paradoxically, while New Labour were introducing policies to encourage students from deprived backgrounds into higher education, they also introduced fees that would make it more difficult for many economically disadvantaged students to attend university. Tuition fees of £1000 per annum were first introduced in 1998, and the Higher Education Act of 2004 (also implemented under Labour) allowed higher education institutions (HEIs) in England to charge variable fees up to £3000 per annum (starting for students enrolling in the 2006 academic year).

However, the Widening Participation agenda was successful in many ways, and the numbers of ethnic minority students and students from working-class backgrounds increased steadily year on year. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has tracked student data across the higher education sector since 1992 and provides annual statistics on key trends. Data from 2015–2016 suggest that students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds attending university have increased by 34% since 2010–2011. This increase is certainly positive in some ways as BME students have historically been underrepresented in higher education, and as such their increased participation suggests universities may well be more inclusive, diverse and open than they once were. However, despite increasing numbers of non-traditional students, Dillon (2001) notes that ‘students from less privileged social backgrounds are, however, still underrepresented in the older, elite universities and Black Minority Ethnic Students are overrepresented in post-1992 higher-education institutions’ (p. 1479). There is also a clear divide in the outcomes for BME students compared with their more traditional (white) peers:

Controlling for entry qualifications, black students are between six and 28 percentage points less likely than white students to get a higher classification degree, while Asian students are between three and 17 percentage points less likely. The differences exist at all levels of entry qualifications, so are even apparent among students who enter higher education with very high prior attainment. (HEFCE, 2018)

Previous research suggests that BME students may face difficulty with academic writing, professional writing and argumentation at university level (HEA/ECU, 2011), have a weak perception of their intellectual abilities, which results in lowered expectations, and have less access to information about degree classification, less knowledge of independent learning and difficulties with critical thinking (Cowden and Singh, 2012). Thinking beyond ethnicity, however, there are a range of factors that may impact on students’ ability to finish their degree and go on to successful careers, including subject of study, institution, socio-economic class, parental education and age on entry (Crawford, 2014).

Gender has also been identified as a key area of oppression (Burke, 2013, 2017; HEA, 2008). Recently, it has been suggested that religion has been largely ignored within the widening participation and diversity literature despite being highlighted as a key area that may negatively impact on students’ experience of higher education (Guest et al., 2013; Stevenson and Clegg, 2012). This is not to claim that religious students have less success but rather students report feeling isolated and marginalized.

Data on students from working class backgrounds reveal similar issues, with an increase of students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds attending university since 1992 (HEFCE, 2018). Findings from the Sutton Trust (2007) suggest that of the 300,000 applicants from less affluent social backgrounds that apply for a place at a UK university, only 1% get into a top tier (top 13)
institution (c.f. Reay et al., 2010). Indeed, working-class students often attend less elite institutions, do not attain as many ‘good’ degrees as their middle-class peers, they tend to drop out or fail to complete their degree, and their employment outcomes are significantly poorer than for other student cohorts (HEFCE, 2018).

These data make it clear that structural inequalities are important issues to consider when thinking about why particular students or groups of students may struggle to achieve narrowly defined measures of ‘success’. As many of these students attend post-1992 institutions, it is not unreasonable to assume then that these universities will be disproportionately impacted as they attract BME and working-class students in far higher numbers than more elite institutions. As noted by the official government data presented above, these students are less likely to meet these success thresholds for reasons that are unlikely to be singularly related to the quality of teaching, and Burke (2017) argues, success is often tied to being able to access resources and networks that are beyond the reach of many non-traditional students. Critically, she argues that gender is a factor here, and that ‘success’ is often tied to hegemonic, masculine norms and that students must perform in certain gendered ways in order to be recognized as ‘legitimate’:

These might include participation in seminar debates and discussion in particular ways, crafting an argument that is substantiated by ‘evidence’ and being ‘rational’ rather than ‘anecdotal’ when ‘participating’ in debate or discussion. Such gendered performatives are problematic for women and men and require the person to position themselves in relation to hegemonic forms of White, masculine dispositions that signify independence, rationality and authority in HE. (Burke, 2017; Leathwood and Read, 2009: 432)

In the next section, we present evidence which suggests non-traditional students may be going to university in higher numbers than before, but that they fare less well than traditional students in terms of ‘success’—particularly when measured in neoliberal terms. Sharing the findings from our research, we illustrate how the radical space of the classroom provides a unique opportunity for the students to consider issues of inequality in relation to class, race and gender. The radical pedagogies we present sit in contrast to the individualistic dynamics of neoliberalism, where the student-as-consumer is reinforced by performative and crude metrics that fail to address the remaining, persistent inequalities. We argue that altering power dynamics in the higher education classroom may have transformative potential, both within the classroom and beyond, with student experiences in this particular pedagogic space positively impacting on their educational experiences and influencing their post-university trajectories as a result.

**Methodology and context**

In order to understand the impact radical pedagogies might have on non-traditional students at a modern university, we collected data from a number of students on a social science degree, who undertook a particular module that used a critical pedagogic approach. Over three successive years, we collected data from student evaluations of the module, peer teaching evaluations for the tutors involved in the module delivery, and qualitative interviews with students on the module that suggest that use of radical pedagogies in this case study had a number of important impacts on students in relation to their personal, social and political development. Students self-selected to take part, and as such the interview sample is not necessarily representative of all student perspectives but does provide some useful insights into the possibilities that using critical pedagogic approaches may provide. Using the interview data, we present key themes that illustrate the value of these approaches in transforming students intellectually, politically and personally. Interviews were carried out with students’ post-graduation, and the interviewer was not a member of the teaching staff.
in the Department or School and so was unknown to them. The study was approved by the School ethics committee, and interviews were carried out on campus at a time suitable for the participants taking into consideration their caring and working responsibilities.

We argue that for the students in this study, the radical space of the classroom provided a unique opportunity for them to consider issues of inequality in relation to class, race and gender. Furthermore, we contend that their experiences in this particular pedagogic space had a profound positive impact on their educational experiences beyond neoliberal metrics that measure certain outcomes as ‘successful’, which ignore other forms of cultural, political and social capital that students accrue in certain classroom spaces.

The university in question is a post-1992 institution in an urban area, a former polytechnic that was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 and is seen as a widening participation university. The students in the research were drawn from programmes in sociology and criminology. Within sociology, admission data between 2013 and 2016 suggested that on average the student cohort comprised mainly females (83%) and only 11% of the sociology cluster was white. The criminology cluster was similar with 74% female intake and a minority intake of white students (40%). Most students were local to the university and commuted to and from class; the vast majority were from state schools, were the first in their family to go into higher education, and many were from households with less than £10,000 annual taxable income.

The ‘gender and sexuality’ module

Our case study offers a counter-narrative to dominant frameworks of performance measurements which are rigid and limited. We show that where hierarchies are disrupted and power dynamics in teaching spaces are reconfigured and reimagined, transformation will follow.

The module in question was an optional final-year undergraduate module open to students studying sociology and criminology. Feminist and radical pedagogic approaches shaped the module, drawing on work from Paolo Friere (1970) and bell hooks (1994) and used participatory approaches to curriculum development. The first 4 weeks of the 24-week module were set out by the teacher, but the remaining 20 weeks were co-created in partnership with students, allowing them to choose topics and readings democratically and set the learning agenda. The classroom was ‘decolonized’ as much as possible, with reading every week from a diverse range of scholars beyond the white, male, heteropatriarchal canon.

The assessments included four short essays that critically assessed topics covered in the classroom (two essays were submitted in December, and two were submitted in April). Students were also asked to deliver a 20-minute presentation based on a scholarly article chosen by the student around a topic related to one of the seminars, and mutually agreed in advance with the module convener. Classroom rules and ways of working together were mutually agreed during the first two classes and a learning contract was signed by every student and the teacher. Assessment criteria for essays and the presentation were also mutually agreed upon as part of the learning contract. There were no ‘lectures’ from the teacher, but rather mini ‘interventions’ about key topics that helped guide the sessions and link key ideas from core readings to issues discussed in class, and were, as such necessarily dialogic and responsive rather than didactic or static. There were approximately 30 students in each cohort we studied over the 3-year period (2013–2016), with a significant majority of female students in each cohort (proportional to the typical gender balance for the degree programme). The majority of students across all 3 years came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and included a large number of BME students, as well as international students and mature students.

The fundamental principles governing the classroom space related to the reduction of hierarchies and an emphasis on emotional and empathetic engagement with students in line with work
from bell hooks (1994) and Paolo Friere (1970) and drew heavily on these scholars to create a feminist-radical space that asked students to consider how issues related to gender and sexuality intersect with other issues (including race, class, religion and nation) and recognize the political nature of these issues. Students were also asked to consider issues around social justice and think about how to move their ‘knowledge’ outside the classroom and outside the academy. Students were asked to participate in the modules as co-creators of the curriculum, which many have argued has the potential to democratize the classroom (Bergmark and Westman, 2016; Bovill and Bulley, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2014). Students were asked to respect the opinions of other students and be mindful of the sensitive nature of some of the conversations (which included issues such as rape and sexual violence, female genital mutilation and reproductive rights). Finally, students were given the option to transfer to another module if they were uncomfortable with this pedagogic approach, and those who enrolled officially were able to miss particular weeks if there was an issue that they felt uncomfortable discussing.

Student evaluations of the module made clear that most of the students who took the class enjoyed their experience, and it is important to note that students also did well by more conventional measures. In 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, no student failed the module and a significant majority received a first or upper second classification – unusually high when compared with other modules across the department. The data presented in the next section, however, make clear how the module was transformative for students in many ways beyond their academic results.

**Disrupting hierarchies: the dialogic classroom**

A guiding value for ‘radical pedagogy’ is that everyone’s presence is acknowledged (hooks, 1994). It was not sufficient that it be merely written into the classroom rules and learning contract, it had to be embedded within the pedagogic approaches of the teacher in congruent and authentic ways where the traditional learner/teacher relationship is replaced by an understanding that everyone can influence the classroom dynamic.

For instance, Carmen, an Asian British female student, emphasizes how learning from other students was an important feature of the classroom environment, but also how students are encouraged to ‘own it’ and contribute their own experiences to the knowledge being produced.

*Carmen: it’s like you’re constantly learning off of each other and it’s encouraged as well because one thing I’ve realised is that sometimes you don’t know a lot of the things, so the academics are trying to give us this information but also have us ‘own it’ – because it’s our experience.*

Her words reinforce the value of dialogue and the idea of oral contributions as precious resources (hooks, 1994), but also makes clear that the normal dynamics that govern the teacher as the source of knowledge is disrupted here. The students’ experiences are privileged as a form of knowledge, and the diversity of the classroom and sense that learning is shared across other students (as well between the teacher/students) is democratizing. The diversity of the classroom was something that emerged as important for students in this cohort, and impacted both on how they saw themselves, but also had an impact on how they related to students who were different from them in some way.

Another student Cecelia (white British) commented on her experience of the classroom – as both diverse and equal – and its impact on her learning:

*Cecelia: I think [in this class] because it’s so diverse, it’s more equal. Like there’s always something for every ethnic background to relate to. For instance, readings on black feminism and black masculinities and things like that. So, people from that sort of background could relate to what everyone was talking about. I don’t think anybody is going to feel left out here and I think having class conversations always helps. Rather than having little groups of conversations because that never really works. I think it’s having*
the tutor take part, and everybody having a discussion, because if someone doesn’t understand something, they can always be explained to. Rather than a tutor just standing there talking.

For Cecelia, the diverse classroom helped her as a white student to see and understand the experiences of students from different backgrounds, and the decolonized and co-created curriculum contributed to a sense of inclusion and meaningful discussion.

The emphasis on dialogue rather than didactic approaches made it easier to actually discuss and talk about the issues raised in the classroom. Moreover, as a political and moral practice, critical pedagogy attempts to ‘make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history’ (Said, 2001: 141). History, in this sense, is engaged as a narrative open to critical dialogue, rather than a predefined text to be memorized and unquestioningly accepted. Moreover, pedagogy in this instance provides the conditions to cultivate in students a healthy scepticism about power, and a ‘willingness to temper any reverence for authority with a sense of critical awareness’ (Said, 2001: 501). The focus on black and postcolonial scholars was frequently noted as important in evaluations, and critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of higher education, if not democracy itself.

While the notion of the all-knowing teacher within the context of a radical pedagogic approach shifts, there is an acknowledgement amongst the students that they have an important part to play in embodying these egalitarian principals:

*Carmen:* Well [XX] was definitely was a very good tutor. Everybody liked her from the beginning because she was just so passionate about her subject and you could see that. It made you want to learn. It wasn’t so much of a tutor-student relationship. And because there were no barriers, you wanted to go to her classes; you wanted to learn. I think having the tutors that are approachable and you can talk to about things makes it a lot easier. You’re not so worried to ask them questions.

*Simone* (a white working-class British woman) made clear that for her, the discussions in the classroom were the beginning of a journey in learning about resistance:

*Simone:* At the time it felt good [during the classroom discussions] because you were debating current affairs and it was exciting as well because I just started to realise that there are people that do challenge things, because you learnt about Marxism and feminism, and it was like: wow, people do stand up!

Her experiencing the classroom as an exciting place is a theme developed further by another student whose quotation below demonstrates how critical pedagogies encourage students to think differently about taken-for-granted assumptions and presumptions:

*Katarina:* Basically, when I started sociology the degree changed me as a person a lot. When I talk to my friends now they tell me that I changed so much that they can’t recognise me… While being in my country, I wouldn’t be allowed to be that open minded, as people are pretty closed-minded… I had to basically put every idea that I grew up with, every belief, put it back in my head, over think it ten times, and see whether I actually agree with it or disagree with it, and choose my own standpoint on that. Rather than believing in what everyone else believes.

This is in direct contrast to the neoliberal view and its narrow view of the purpose of higher education which is expressed in the work of Feigenbaum:
Perhaps it is not so much that this ever intensifying, hyperactive focus on employability morphs students into mini-capitalists, but rather that it eats away at their imaginations, making it difficult for students to envision how university knowledge translates into meaningful possibilities for self or social change. Feigenbaum (2007: 338–339)

The students show how given an alternative experience their imagination can be nurtured, through which comes powerful change. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to use examples and resources which are relevant to the lives of the students. Keisha is a Black woman, a mature student and a mother who embodies the idea of education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994):

Keisha: [Going to university] boosted my confidence to no end, because before I undertook the degree, I felt like I hadn’t really achieved much since I had left school, and that was over 10 years ago, because I was 26 when I started at uni. So, it just boosted my confidence in lots of different aspects of my life, so obviously I can now say I’m a graduate, but it affected me in different ways and I guess I held my head a little bit higher. All I can say is it boosted my confidence in every kind of way! The sense of achievement that I felt, it just infiltrated all aspects of my life, basically, so I felt like somebody, I had achieved something. And even with my children and being like, ‘Your mums studied’, and I felt like I was doing something with my time. So, I would say it’s changed my life.

Through her words we see how participating in a particular type of experience offers us the opportunity to reinterpret and become reflective ‘if education is conceived as a process of futuring, or releasing persons to become different, of provoking persons to repair lacks and to take action to create themselves’ (Greene, 1988: 22).

We include here a further extract from Keisha’s interview to show her own journey from learner to teacher and progressive critical thinker in her own community. In authentic ways, she describes how she is now exchanging and sharing knowledge to others:

Interviewer: In terms of relationships with friends and family, you’ve spoken about how you see the world, but has it changed your relationships with friends and family?

Keisha: I wouldn’t say it’s changed them but definitely whenever I had instances or days when I believe university and I’ve learnt something that was incredible, I definitely was keen to share that information with people around me, especially stuff that I really thought was important, because I wanted everybody else to wake up, essentially. So, it did feel like a small revolution, it was revolutionary to me anyway, and I wanted to make sure that everybody else was aware of it, because I did feel like it was something that everybody should know, and I didn’t feel like it was something I should keep to myself.

The knowledge that Keisha gained at university has transformed her life, made her more confident and led her to question things she previously took for granted. Her learning is made political in her desire to share this with her friends and family, and to share her ‘small revolution’ with other people who are important in her life.

In his work on bare pedagogies, Giroux (2010) draws on the work of Agamben (1998) and radical pedagogue Freire (1970) to argue that ‘pedagogy at its best is about neither training, teaching methods, nor political indoctrination. Freire pedagogy is not a method of an a priori technique to be imposed on students’ (Giroux, 2010: 192), but rather a form of politics based in a particular ethical framework that helps students developing critical thinking skills in order to ‘expand the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in
the promise of a substantive democracy’ (ibid). This form of teaching examines power relations and attempts to disrupt the traditional teacher-as-all-knowing and student-as-submissive-learner to reconstitute social relations in the classroom in a more egalitarian way.

More recently, Giroux (2015) has argued that critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts, and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects and social agents. In this instance, the issues of how identities, values and desires are shaped in the classroom are the grounds of politics. Critical pedagogy is thus invested both in the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform teaching and in a critical self-consciousness regarding what it means to equip students with analytical skills to be self-reflective about the knowledge and values they confront in classrooms. Moreover, such a pedagogy attempts not only to provide the conditions for students to understand academic texts, but also opens up new avenues for them to reconsider important political and social issues that are relevant to them in new ways. Using critical pedagogic approaches enables them to assume some sense of responsibility in delivering these social and political changes to one another in the classroom, but also to their friends, family and society, long after they leave.

Adopting a ‘performance management’ approach changes the very nature of education from a ‘free public good’ to a commercial industry that can be monitored and managed in the same way as private businesses would be. The marketization of education in the United Kingdom is not unique, and Giroux and Giroux (2006) point out that these strategies have been deployed in the United States for decades as the state moves away from providing public and social goods for its citizens, towards an intensely capitalist regime that prioritizes profit over people. We argue that the recent introduction of more quality assurance and performance technologies works with neoliberal processes that are currently driving the commodification of public education by using ‘performance management’ measures to create hierarchical divisions between different HEIs.

Conclusion

The research we undertook has heightened our understanding about the effectiveness of radical pedagogies in increasing the critical skills, self-awareness, knowledge and confidence of non-traditional students studying in one UK university. The students provided compelling testimony of how being immersed in a learning environment, in the words of Friere, facilitated ‘conscientization’ in the classroom. For them, higher education is not merely about grades and employability it is about what counts as knowledge, a changed perception of self and of the world which enables them to navigate that world with a greater sense of agency and aspiration. University had a transformative impact on the study participants, but also a positive response to learning. Despite the increasing neoliberalization of higher education, it is still possible to develop political pedagogic spaces that challenge the status quo and push back against capitalist approaches; students in this they developed sophisticated levels of critical thinking which would not be achieved by a ‘bare pedagogic’ approach. We conclude that the space of the radical classroom – as a place of mutual learning and dialogue where traditional hierarchies between teacher as ‘expert’ and student as ‘learner’ are disrupted – allow for transformative potentials for students that goes beyond degree classification, or their immediate employment prospects. As Keisha suggests, critical pedagogies offer non-traditional students revolutionary possibilities.

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Notes
1. In 2010, the Conservative Government was in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats ran on a political platform that promised there would be no fee increases and the subsequent introduction of much larger fees was seen as a major political failure for both the Liberal Democrats. For more on this see: https://web.archive.org/web/20101211105335/http://www.journal-online.co.uk/article/6236-lib-dems-downgrade-tuition-fees-pledge
2. It is important to note that following devolution in 1999, the Scottish and Welsh governments brought in their own acts on tuition fees, which are significantly different from the English higher education funding system.
4. Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) ceased to exist as of April 2018 and has been replaced with the Office for Students and Research England, under new guidelines from the Conservative Government.

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