A space for partnership and empowerment: how the Writing Café negotiates inclusion in higher education

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) has traditionally been shaped for a specific type of student, but as widening participation initiatives are increasing opportunities for under-represented groups to attend (e.g., mature, disabled, those from a low socio-economic background, and care leavers), it is imperative to illuminate examples of best practice that are accessible and equitable once students are at university. This paper discusses the Writing Café, an interdisciplinary, peer facilitated space for students to explore writing techniques and strategies with trained student writing mentors. This will illustrate how the Writing Café is promoting inclusion for students who have been traditionally excluded from HE. The Writing Café encourages student partnership through its interdisciplinary nature, which empowers students to be experts in their work. This is challenging deficit and hierarchical approaches in academia, repositioning who has the power and knowledge in HE. The Writing Café provides a space out of formal teaching that has more support than independent learning, thus being considered a third space for learning (Hilsdon, 2014). The offer of hybrid Writing Café spaces has boosted inclusivity and accessibility through improving comfort and ease of access. Under-represented students are likely to face more barriers in HE, so supportive and accessible provision can combat many such barriers. The Writing Café's success is highlighted by engagement, with the development of hybrid delivery increasing participation by 45%, with engagement for under-represented students being 10% more than the university demographic of such students. The Writing Café is illustrating how inclusion in academic practices is possible.

Keywords: inclusion; social justice; student empowerment; peer mentoring; belonging; third space.

Introduction

Under-represented groups (e.g., mature, disabled, those from a low socio-economic background, and care leavers) have inequitable experiences in higher education (HE), particularly in relation to finances, feelings of belonging, and academic skills (Reay, 2016). However, despite the implementation of widening participation (WP) initiatives, there are still barriers that under-represented students face prior to and during university (see Ridge, 2011; Timmis and Muñoz-Chereau, 2022). For clarity, equity is used here rather than equality, highlighting that inclusion does not mean equal treatment, but tailored support for individuals to access the same experiences/resources/knowledge, acknowledging that some individuals experience more barriers than others.

Motivated by the necessity for improving HE for under-represented students, this piece explores how utilising peer-to-peer support can promote social justice, illuminating how spaces and relationships that work in partnership are empowering and inclusive (Hinsdale, 2015). Whilst complex, social justice and inclusion can be defined as equitable access, treatment, and experience for all, regardless of diverse characteristics and backgrounds (Lambert, 2018). This opinion piece will explore how spaces like the Writing Café, which utilise peer support, interdisciplinary partnership, and non-hierarchical engagement(s), are crucial for improving participation and inclusion within HE for under-represented students. Many initiatives push for access but neglect to consider the experiences of students once they are at university (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). The following will contextualise HE, draw on Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital (1986; 1993), illuminate and challenge hierarchical academic practices, and consider partnership, empowerment, and accessibility to emphasise the power of peer-to-peer learning and the third space.

Contextual background

The Writing Café has been operating in a UK university since 2014; it was created with the intention of providing a 'a developmental, creative space' existing outside academic norms (Pritchard, 2015). The Writing Café space utilises peer-to-peer support and non-academic terrains (in-person and digitally) to engage students in discussions about their academic writing, including clarity of arguments and structure, with trained writing mentors. The

space is unique in its offering – being led in partnership between students and the Peer Learning Team – and in how it challenges academic spaces by using a café format. The culture of HE in the UK is rooted in white-middle-class-non-disabled-heteronormative-cis-gendered-English-speaking hegemonies (Seal, 2019; Tavares, 2021). Consequently, under-represented students experience more inhibited access and participation; this is attributable to how HE has been shaped around the traditional student profile that dominates university culture. Arguably, this has influenced structural and institutional norms to favour such students (Ardion, 2018), including how notions of independence and rigid entry requirements claim to ensure that the most capable attend HE (Barg, 2019). In reality, this positions those with the support, opportunities and/or resources to succeed academically and develop personally as better candidates. Positively, there is a rise in WP for under-represented and diverse students (Klinger and Murray, 2012), but they must navigate and 'decode' the unfamiliar terrain of HE (Gibson et al., 2019). Consequently, inclusive spaces and practices are imperative for combatting such structural, social, and academic barriers, as they challenge hegemonies surrounding who has the knowledge within academia. Here, barriers include course-specific jargon, confidence with independent learning (linked to cultural capital), academic hierarchy, and how HE is rooted in middle-class norms. How the Writing Café addresses such barriers is discussed below.

Navigating academic terrains

To navigate a particular space or institution, one must be familiar with the dominant practices. As academia mirrors the dominant culture of society (Douglas, 2016; Arday, 2021), student demographics reflect this, and HE is shaped around these groups, making it less aligned with under-represented students. Current implementations of WP are attempting to change this (Teichler, 2015); however, they often neglect intersectional and structural barriers, hidden below utopian and idealistic lenses (Arday, 2021). Therefore, we must acknowledge these (un)hidden discourses to consider how to unravel the challenges.

To theorise navigating unfamiliar academic and structural terrains, Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital will be drawn upon (1986; 1993). Cultural Capital can be defined as the familiarity, confidence, and experience(s) one has in the cultural world and dominant society (Beckman et al., 2018). Within HE, Cultural Capital may involve linguistic skills,

knowledge of education systems, and participation in cultural activities (Barg, 2019), rooted in socioeconomic processes. Access to cultural experiences and knowledge can shape the confidence one has within other spaces that reflect this culture. Subsequently, academic practices are more aligned with 'traditional' students, which makes academic language, social interactions, and writing processes more difficult to navigate, leaving students who are on-the-margins feeling isolated, uncertain, and lacking in confidence (Pherali, 2012). This can contribute to an unwillingness to seek help, due to a fear of the stigma attached to not knowing (Kelly and Mulrooney, 2019). This clearly shows how those from more represented groups can navigate such academic terrains more easily, as HE, and practices within it, are perhaps more familiar to them.

Consequently, by utilising peer-to-peer partnership, typical barriers of academic hierarchy can be reduced, as mentors and students engage in reciprocal discussions. Since HE has an increased focus on self-directed learning, time-management, and confidence with writing (linked to Cultural Capital (Dittmann, Stephens and Townsend, 2020)), the Writing Café provides a space where one does not have to have mastered all the above, thus empowering students. Accessibility created by peer-to peer partnership was exemplified in Semester 1 of 2021/2022, where approximately 75% of attendees across both physical and digital spaces identified as being from an under-represented background. This highlights the power that the Writing Café has on levelling the power imbalance and increasing student participation; this is particularly impactful when noting that Café participation is 10% higher than the under-represented student demographic. Therefore, the Writing Café is shifting the dynamic of academic engagements through the 'third space' and successfully increasing engagements for all identified under-represented groups. Arguably, through student partnership and challenging academic norms, this aspect of HE becomes easier to navigate.

Mutuality and partnership

The Writing Café is a student-centred, interdisciplinary, and non-hierarchical space (Pritchard, 2015), situated outside the academic boundaries of HE. It has been identified (Cameron, Nairn and Higgins, 2009; Moraes, Michaelidou and Canning, 2016) that there is discomfort when sharing writing, especially with course peers and/or academic staff. In the Writing Café, students are partnered with a mentor who is often non-subject specific; this

one-to-one support not only increases comfort with sharing working, due to the personal nature of writing (Hall, 2014; Hill et al., 2021), but is more likely to alleviate academic knowledge barriers through leaning together as non-experts in their subject. Arguably, this empowers students, providing agency and increasing confidence with their subject knowledge, since they are the 'expert' in this space. Students are encouraged to shape the discussion, where they must adapt their explanations for a non-expert, evidencing their expertise to themselves. In is known that with academic tutors under-represented students can feel pressure to articulate their work and use jargonistic language to meet perceived expectations and avoid potential stigmatisation (Bowl, 2001; Warnock and Hurst, 2016). Lillis and Turner (2001) and Raaper, Brown and Llewellyn (2022) support this, identifying a deficit-model placed upon non-traditional students who were unfamiliar with academic language and writing, but acknowledging that the barriers to academic writing are in inaccessible pedagogies and the lack of transparency from academics. In contrast to academic practices, discussion with a writing mentor requires students to unpack jargonistic terms, which is not only empowering, but can boost confidence, clarity, and understanding. Thus, sharing ideas on a level playing field and encouraging a safe space where students can question academic meanings and feel unsure, can enhance a sense of belonging and enable a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Pritchard, 2015). Therefore, this space is critical for promoting social justice and not providing a space for all learners to develop their language and writing would be a matter of exclusion (Klinger and Murray, 2012).

Additionally, the accessibility of the café encourages autonomy and allows students to seek support when needed with no expectations or commitment, since the library is a space for independent learning, and the online space can be accessed from anywhere. As attending is a personal choice, mutuality is established, as a two-way discussion is developed; again, since mentors are often non-subject specific, there is a mutuality in the way students share subject knowledge whilst mentors share academic writing skills – learning from one another. Both spaces encapsulate the 'third space' for learning, a hybrid space between independent learning and experiences, and formal learning and teaching (Hilsdon, 2014), moving towards individuals learning together in partnership. This informal space allows more mutual and reciprocal discussions to take place, with student partnership being core to knowledge production.

Boosting inclusivity and accessibility

The Writing Café has evolved to meet the needs of learners, alongside responding to changes in the academic environment, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought into sharp relief the necessity for a flexible provision. With the shift to online teaching, the digital Writing Café engaged more students and was recognised as a case study for best practice in The Gravity Assist report (Barber et al., 2021), highlighting accessibility and inclusion, particularly for disabled students and parents/carers, placement students, and distance learners. Now, both spaces run in tandem and, despite requiring additional resources, they are imperative for ensuring students from all backgrounds can utilise the space. Providing an accessible space is empowering, as students can take ownership of, and make choices about, their support. It begins to normalise seeking support too, which challenges notions of deficit and promotes inclusion, both contextually (digital and/or physical) and through café practices (peer-to-peer interdisciplinary partnership).

Positively, through offering both digital and physical spaces, there has been a 45% increase in engagement compared to pre-pandemic. The digital space enables students to 'step' into accessing support, with camera-off options – particularly valuable for uncertain students who are wishing to 'test-the-water'. This is emphasised by the participation of mature students in the Writing Café; the over-21 and under-21 split was 52% to 48% respectively, contrasting with the undergraduate population which has a higher proportion of under-21s.

While universities transitioned formal teaching online and Student Unions created online quizzes during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were not as prepared to develop informal learning spaces. As formal teaching was replicated online, the Writing Café filled a gap where informal learning could happen, which is likely to have been absent without this service. Further, Ransing et al. (2021) identified the benefits of camaraderie during a time of uncertainty and isolation; arguably, the Writing Café enabled this kind of space. Increased engagement has occurred (Barber et al., 2021) despite the rise of online learning exacerbating pre-existing social injustices, particularly due to the increased demand on self-directed learning and the requirement for additional motivation in a time that challenged much of what was known in HE previously (Aparicio, Bacao and Oliveira, 2017). With under-represented students being less confident with self-directed learning

(Lee, 2010), as discussed above, the necessity of digital formats that provide accessible academic support, e.g., the Writing Café, is brought to the forefront.

Conclusion

The above discussion illuminates the power of peer-to-peer support for promoting inclusion, particularly since interactions with under-represented groups are higher in the Writing Café than with the general student population – clearly there is strength in the work done. The opportunity to develop non-hierarchical and mutual partnership can encourage agency to take ownership of writing and engage in discussions. Through challenging traditional academic practices that have excluded under-represented groups, the Writing Café is developing an inclusive space. The non-expert and interdisciplinary nature of the space can alleviate expectations on academic skills and subject knowledge (linked to Cultural Capital), requiring students to strip-back their understanding to articulate ideas to a novice in their subject. Since this removes academic knowledge barriers, students can feel more comfortable discussing their work, contributing to feeling included within HE; comfort develops empowerment, which builds confidence, enhances a sense of belonging and improves experiences. The digital and physical Writing Cafés are operating as a means for all students to access support. The Writing Café support can contribute towards the academic development of all students, but particularly students who are under-represented within HE, potentially improving their attainment (and wellbeing). The Writing Café ensures that support is offered to all students in HE, beyond simply improving access to it; in doing so, the Writing Café navigates the non-negotiables for inclusion within HE.

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