

Book review

Case, J. M. 2013. *Researching Student Learning in Higher Education. A Social Realist Approach*. London: Routledge.

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Higher education systems around the world are complex, multi-layered beasts, increasingly influenced, particularly in the Western, Anglophone world, by discourses of efficiency, managerialism, and the ‘knowledge economy’. Universities and colleges are increasingly called upon to produce work-ready and able graduates, and industry writ large often bemoans the lack of ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ on the part of graduates, turning back to universities to ask for more ‘responsive’ curricula and teaching approaches. From the top down, and the bottom up, university managers, lecturers, administrators and students are grappling with the complexities of, on the one hand, students gaining access to a university (and ensuring the access to the means to stay there long enough to graduate), and on the other hand, ensuring the successful graduation (and employment) of those students.

South Africa is part of this complex system, although the reality in this country is complicated further by its colonial and apartheid legacy, the effects of which, in the education sector in particular, are still strongly in evidence today. Two significant pieces of research in the last decade have pointed to inequalities in the higher education system in South Africa in terms of both access and success. Briefly and broadly, many more white students than black students are enrolling in higher education, proportionate to their demographics, and the graduation rates are markedly skewed in favour of white students outperforming their black peers (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007; CHE, 2013). Questions of how best to facilitate or enable student success are prominent, therefore, in education debates in South Africa (although this is by no means unique to South Africa), and much of the current research in education, particularly higher education, focuses in on issues of improving teaching and learning, specifically, what do we need to be doing to ensure that more students succeed in the ways they need to in order to meet the requirements of the workplace, and society more broadly?

Jennifer Case, in this book, takes up this broad question using a relatively novel approach to researching student learning in higher education. Her central argument is that true higher education should be concerning itself with what she terms, after Margaret Archer, the ‘morphogenesis of student agency (p.140). In other words, higher education should be aiming itself, in all spheres, towards enabling students, through deep and meaningful engagements with disciplinary knowledges, to transform their agency in relevant ways, such that they become ‘social actors’ capable of working individually and collectively towards individual and social goods.

In inserting ‘a full consideration of student agency into the context of higher education’ (p.4) Case’s aim is to theorise what we cannot see in this context – the mechanisms, tendencies, motivations – that manifest in what students choose to study, when, where, and how they engage in the processes of learning, and engaging with disciplinary knowledge. To do this, Case uses data she has generated in a longitudinal study of student learning in Engineering at the University of Cape Town over the last decade, re-analysing it using a theoretical and analytical framework derived from social realism.

Social realism, argues Case, is well-suited to the tough task of researching and theorising student learning because of its ontological commitment to looking beneath what we can experience of the world, or see in the observable world around us, in the effort to understand what the world is like such that what we can observe and experience is made possible. In particular, Case draws on the work of two renowned sociologists, Margaret Archer and Basil Bernstein, to research student learning in a way that can move us beyond simply understanding what might be towards identifying ways to change the current system such that student *agency* is more centrally and clearly seen and accounted for, and transformed over the course of their undergraduate education.

In order to build her argument around the potential value of a social realist perspective on researching student learning, Case makes use of a case study: that of Engineering education at the University of Cape Town, a field in which she has been working and researching for over 15 years. What sets this study apart, immediately upon opening the book, is the voices of students at the forefront of the research. Starting with the story of Sizwe, a third-year student at the time he was interviewed, the book builds, carefully and clearly, an argument for considering students’ voices

and their layered agency – personal and social - in any research that has at its heart the ultimate goal of making relevant and necessary changes to curricula, pedagogy, student engagement and so on that enable the morphogenesis of student agency over time.

Case argues, throughout the book, for a deeper social realist account of agency, to build a strong explanatory account of why and how students learn that considers the wider context – structural and cultural – that conditions the choices they feel able to make in relation to their learning. To illustrate: she argues that – and the students’ stories in the book are drawn out of interviews conducted with the students during their third year of study – we can know what people think, feel, believe based on their accounts of these things. But, if all we have is their account, and we divorce this from a more holistic, critical account of the context in which they socialise, learn, interact with the world, we will only have a very partial picture, and we will not have an account of learning, for instance, that would be very useful if we were trying to make learning more accessible and do-able for more students. In order to use students’ accounts of their reality more usefully as a way of understanding the possible structural and cultural constraints and enablements of the larger system, we need to be able to see the system itself, and place the accounts of reality within this, carefully and critically. We need, in Archer’s terms, to be able to theorise the social and socio-cultural contexts in which we operate, as well as the different kinds of agency we exercise in deciding on what our ‘modus vivendi’, or way of living – our own reality – should or could be.

What is so valuable about the research Case draws on to make her argument is the social realist approach she brings to the narrative data she has generated. What the social realist tools and methods enable is a much more nuanced, and considerate, account of students’ choices and reasoning in approaching their own learning that does indeed take us beyond their subjective experiences towards a view of the structural and cultural enablements and hindrances they have engaged with moving from their prior home and school contexts into the higher education, and disciplinary, contexts in which they are expected to succeed. How students navigate these contexts, and exercise their agency in profoundly complex, and sometimes unexpected ways, gives us pause for thought about the assumptions higher education makes about who students are and what they want from their learning experiences. Case’s careful,

powerful argument issues a challenge to university management, lecturers, administrators: can we change the structural and cultural context in which higher education functions such that a greater number of students feels 'at home' there, and are able to shift and change their agency in relevant ways as they progress through their undergraduate degrees? What might such a system look like, and how might it function differently? If higher education has, as one of its core aims, a commitment to enhancing society through educating future leaders and innovators, then it must consider a different view of students, learning and the public and social good.

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