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'Miss, is anthropology about studying ants?' An experience of university Widening Participation activities reflected upon by a teacher of the rural working-class

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Abstract
As an English teacher and student of anthropology, I have experienced how rural and urban students have different experiences of access to university. This paper is a reflection on the lived-experience of widening participation activities, considering location as a factor of inequality. These experiences raise observations about familiarity as an important concept for considering university study, and exposes how some students are currently strangers to widening participation provision. In contemplating how these circumstances come about, I conclude by proposing some potential solutions for widening participation in the future.

Keywords title: widening participation; education; rural working class; secondary schools; diversity; equality

Introduction: Country mouse, town mouse

Over my fourteen years as a teacher in rural Somerset, one thing has remained true: many of the students I teach experience life as if on an island far removed from the opportunities of the rest of the country. When I speak to students about what I am interested in, they have no idea about anthropology. My favourite response to the question, 'What is anthropology?' came from a wide-eyed lad, a little bit cheeky and full of enthusiasm. "Miss! I know!" he called out, ignoring others waiting patiently with their hands up. "Is it the study of ants?" At this time, while I was teaching part-time in Somerset, I was simultaneously working as a widening participation (WP) outreach teacher in London for University College London (UCL), running sessions for school and college students to experience university subjects like anthropology through lessons, lectures, and activities. Just a few days before the 'ants' comment, I delivered a lecture in an enormous theatre at UCL brimming with around two hundred 14-16 year olds eager to experience anthropology for the first time. The contrast between the experiences was remarkable. It appeared to me these students in London had access to, and experience of, something that in Somerset we weren't privy to. It is tempting to consider that the issue sits with the unfamiliarity of the subject, anthropology, since it isn't a school subject. However, I was drawn to reflect on the students' relationship with higher education more broadly.

As the teacher in both scenes, the disparity of the experience was stark, and forced a contemplation of the importance of location as an aspect of inequality in education. In this paper, I critique WP in relation to rural access through my experiences as a secondary school teacher, teaching English to children aged 11-16 in a rural, state school, as well as my experiences as a student of anthropology. As a mechanism to introduce school and college aged students to university study, I reveal WP is both formative of, and symptomatic of, inequality in education. As school is a step on the path to university, rural students are experiencing a form of exclusion because of their remoteness. This complicates possible definitions of diversity since my students' issues cannot be identified or solved by exploring issues of class, ethnicity, or economic status, however important these factors are too. It does not just matter who they are, but also where they are. Current WP programmes focus on meeting objectives of attracting specific numbers of students from targeted demographics as per instruction from the government. As such, WP fails to achieve meaningful impact for all disadvantaged[i] students who live in a variety of different contexts. This leads me to suggest the importance of further research into the intention and outcomes of WP. Finally, I propose future suggestions for WP, creating familiarity, and providing personal enrichment.

This paper is a collection of my reflections on personal experiences, rather than a piece of formal research. To consider students' experiences of WP, I reflect on my teaching experiences over the last four years. This includes teaching in four schools in Somerset as well as outreach-teaching for UCL in London. During this time, I also completed a Master's in Social and Cultural Anthropology at UCL, and focused my dissertation on affective practices in English education. I choose this period because it is a time of heightened reflexivity within my teaching practice. It is also a time where I kept a journal of experiences focused on rural life, aspiration, and class in education. To maintain anonymity, I do not identify any person in this paper. I do not refer to their backgrounds or identify who might be considered socially or economically disadvantaged, their ages, or their school's name or town.

Defining Diversity: On being the stranger

For the purposes of this paper, I interpret diversity as inextricably linked to inclusion. In her introduction to 'On Being Included' (2012), Ahmed discusses the feeling of being a stranger, and uses the metaphor of arriving, reminding us of coming from somewhere else into somewhere unknown. Similarly, Harwood et al. reveal how young people need to achieve a sense of 'belonging' from WP, and centre much of their research in how education *feels* (2017). By applying the concepts of strangeness and belonging to rural students attending WP activities, I demonstrate how they embody an outsider's position. They are physically, culturally, and socially removed from the familiar as well as into the unfamiliar. By assuming location as a form of discrimination, we can see how important familiarity is to inclusion.
WP is intended to be an access point to create familiarity, but opportunity to participate in WP is not equally available. As such, considering Joan Acker's theory of 'inequality regimes' (2006) in relation to student access to WP reveals how it is an aspect of inequality in education. Acker argues all organisations create "inequality regimes" which are "systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes" (2006: p443). WP inadvertently acts as an instrument of an education inequality regime insofar as it acts as a gateway to experience something considered valuable and prestigious. This gateway is controlled by those in *power*; the staff, teachers, and lecturers at schools, colleges and universities. Access is restricted and controlled insofar as it is not something a student can easily seek and organise for themselves. Entry is both managed by school and university staff as well as limited through location and available places. Exclusive entry further reinforces the hierarchical structure as selective access invests university with prestige – it appears as the pinnacle of education available to just a few, leaving many behind feeling as if they never belonged anyway.

Notions of being a stranger and feelings of strangeness are useful in understanding rural working-class students' relationship with education. The students I am writing about are from Somerset and many of them are from the poorest 10% of England in socio-economic terms. They are white, British, and from working-class families, and are between 11 and 16 years old. They do not necessarily identify with a specific class; however, they frequently define themselves in contrast to people they consider posh who they describe using terms like, 'up themselves' or, 'think they're better than us'. They also define themselves against people who live in urban areas, who they call 'townies'. They talk with pride about parents who 'work hard' at their jobs, and often openly regard the accruement of student debt with words like 'dumb'. These rural students lack shared or historic experiences of university study. My personal experience listening to them suggests they do not feel education fulfils their needs (see Devlin & McKay, 2014 and Harwood, 2017) for further research into the importance of shared experiences of university). Thus, they feel like outsiders.

The examples and ideas in this paper suggest further investigation is needed into WP as a form of social and cultural capital[ii], perhaps understanding these forms of capital outside of structured, curricula experiences. Exploring engagement with WP further might also give insight into other forms of educational engagement and performance. Additionally, concepts such as belonging, relevance, and familiarity, might also warrant further research, particularly considering how educational experience might influence notions of identity and value.

Widening Participation: The intention and the failure

While WP is intended to make university accessible for disadvantaged and BAME[iii] students, it fails to make a meaningful difference for students outside of university hometowns. Academics have researched some of the difficulties faced by WP, such as administrative pressures to focus on specific students (See Ahmed and Swan, 2006, Pickard, 2014, and Trowler et al., 2019), but university student bodies still have few students from disadvantaged and BAME backgrounds (Department of Education, 2018, and HESA, 2020). HESA documents

how working-class applications to university are low (2020). So, in some way, WP is unable to consistently attract these students or to enable them to feel included. To draw from the research mentioned above, assumptions can be made that where WP succeeds, its impact is still limited; it fails to reach all members of under-represented communities, and obviously cannot compensate for broader, societal issues – or, for the purposes of this paper, location.

Academics such as Ahmed argue that WP is tokenistic, offering the minimum to tick a box rather than being open to necessary structural change (Ahmed, 2007 and 2012, Pickard 2014, and Trowler et al., 2019). While WP activities are theoretically open to all, without a university nearby, rural schools are rarely targeted to attend, and when they are, they are typically one-off, tailored events. WP activities are organised to be varied and hosted throughout the year, but rural students might only have access to one event at most; most commonly, they have access to none. WP sometimes happen in schools and sometimes in universities. One thing is consistent: during my time at UCL, they always happened in London. Attendees were mostly from the city and surrounding areas. The only student I taught who had travelled from the south west was from a selective grammar school.

Tokenism occurs because success is measured quantitively, and therefore improving statistics becomes the goal. The government establishes statistical objectives for WP; they define WP as aimed at potential students from "disadvantaged backgrounds […] and other under-represented groups" (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018). There are two specific goals: the first is to attract more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the second is to attract 20% more BAME students; they highlight these must be achieved with "demonstrable impact" (*ibid.*). Arguably, to assuredly demonstrate impact, it would be "smarter" (*ibid.*) for universities to target schools with high levels of both BAME and disadvantaged students in their locality to make WP efficient, precise and manageable – if students are BAME, disadvantaged, and nearby, they achieve both objectives with one easy to control provision. Thus, WP becomes tokenistic in the name of efficiency. While the targeted students are important, and every success is valuable, by considering location as a factor of inequality, we see that tokenistic strategies are as exclusive as they are inclusive. Returning to the stranger metaphor, targeted WP provision suggests prioritising people who already possess some familiarity with the institution: somebody nearby.

Experience of Widening Participation

Students form an educational identity in relation to WP and ideas of university study. It reinforces their role as the stranger, and it affirms their lesser status in the *inequality regime* because they are outsiders. Participating in WP acts like a random lottery win, providing a few young people with an amazing opportunity which bares as much resemblance to their reality as winning Willy Wonka's Golden Ticket. When I talk to students about my research into student perspectives of education, and what I gained as a Somerset-girl when I went to university, they respond as if I am the exception. They say things like, 'If you do that, why would you want to work here?' or 'Nothing ever happens here', and 'this is a rubbish place; we never get to do things like that'. Their comments reveal how internalised perceptions of disadvantage have become, even when their only disadvantage is their location. They believe university study is for *other* people.

In my experience, the very few students who get a university visit are selected from a pre-designated list of criteria. For my schools, typically students are either 'Gifted and Talented[iv]' (G&T) or 'Disadvantaged'; I do not recollect many initiatives being an open invite because of personal interest or to offer a new experience. For example, in one school, we ran an extra-curricular Latin class for our G&T students, who had been identified by high achievement in specific tests. We then took them on a day trip to visit Bath University at the end of the course. From the teacher-organiser's perspective, this met the objective for G&T enrichment as outlined by our School Improvement Plan (SIP). Students were not identified because of an interest in studying the classics, or an interest in Bath University, and the offer was not open to any other students. They were chosen only because they ticked a box for us; nobody stopped to ask if this was useful to them.

Whichever way a student is selected to attend, they embody the characteristics of a prize-winner in a field of those not selected – those who by default become non-winners. Those selected celebrate having a day out of school, being allowed to wear non-uniform, going to a city, and being the centre of attention. For my students, simple things like going to McDonald's become central to their experience since many of our rural towns do not have one. They get to miss boring things like assemblies and get to talk of their adventure to a far-flung place, like Bath, Bristol, or Exeter, which makes them socially interesting upon return. The WP activity is an isolated experience outside of day-to-day life. It is worth considering whether a one-off activity is adequate enough to

make an opportunity seem familiar or believable. For example, in contrast, one London-based student remarked that university students visited her school regularly, spoke in assemblies, worked with small groups, and ran extra-curricular clubs. She spoke about seeing students shopping and being in fast-food places where they hung out. She and her friends were constantly aware of university as a normal and achievable pathway after school. She found it bizarre to imagine school without these experiences.

These visits also reinforce beliefs of inaccessibility to those who don't get to go to WP activities – the non-winners; they recount their perspectives, in a class of students left behind, in terms like, 'I never get chosen', 'It's always him/her', or the more defensive, 'I don't wanna go anyway'. These statements reveal an insecure relationship with the idea of higher education study and a correlation with how WP creates a sense of value or luck. The bridge built by WP acts like a temporary portal through which only a select few can move.

The major factor that reinforces this stranger role for rural students is their remoteness. Our most local universities are well over an hour's drive from our schools, requiring a whole day out or a late evening. These activities for us are outside our county as our closest universities are in Bristol or Exeter; these are cities many of our students haven't ever visited. Therefore, the WP experience is a bit like a holiday. On return, our students comment on 'weird' foods, the cost of things, how busy the roads were, or being lost in enormous buildings. They generally complain they were given insufficient time to go shopping or to eat somewhere exciting, since rural towns lack the variety of shops they find in the city. This leads me to believe familiarisation with university study isn't achieved in one visit.

Even when we are invited, the university initiative seems exciting, and we are keen to offer it to students, we cannot always participate. Being located as we are, frequently we cannot justify the expense or time to run WP trips for pupils to attend these kinds of opportunities. One experience of running a trip to London for 15 students was riddled with difficulties. It was a long and tiring day, and we did not return to school until 3.30am; yet everyone was expected to attend morning registration the next day at 8.35am: no excuses. This makes trip-running unappealing for staff who are already tired and over-worked, and challenging for students who need stability and rest. Additionally, the quotes for bus transport alone came in at over £1200, creating a cost of £80 per student before food, tube-travel, tickets, and sundries. Even if parents will contribute to the cost, which would exclude many disadvantaged students, we can rarely take a teacher off-timetable[v] for the day to make this possible. For this activity, I was allowed off-timetable, but initially I was the only teacher on the trip. I then managed to persuade a member of our senior leadership to move some meetings to join us. The rest of the adults available to make up the regulation numbers were non-teaching staff – good adult to child ratios, but not always possessing the skills or experience needed to manage groups of young people. Furthermore, non-teaching staff are just as unlikely to want to go on a trip that takes them away from their home lives without pay or time back in lieu.

As a contrasting experience, as part of UCL's WP team, I delivered sessions to school students in London. The students I taught in London were confident and believed they should be in the room. Their bags were filled with books and laptops, and they knew how to take notes; many of them were already debating whether to take anthropology at university, suggesting familiarity with the subject and the institution. They were bold enough to ask questions and challenge ideas; they appeared to feel equal in our vast lecture halls and seminar rooms, and even confident enough to show-off. While not an exhaustive study of the urban experience, it directly contrasts the experience in Somerset.

While these are just a few contrasting experiences of WP, I hope to have established how location is a factor to be considered in educational inequality, and how when we form fixed notions of what inclusivity or diversity means, we inadvertently always leave someone else on the outside. Wrapped up in these experiences are other issues, such as familiarity, aspiration, and relevance, as are the complications of funding and time. But if WP is ever going to be a valued mechanism to enable young people interested in university study to attend, it needs to achieve a global accessibility as opposed to individual invite; it definitely shouldn't be a means for bolstering exclusion.

Conclusion and the future

When considering WP, it is important to reflect on whether anthropology sits comfortably with the notion of tackling social mobility by reinforcing a regime of inequality. Our subject is well-positioned to challenge this system, and as such, has a responsibility to do so. By making British education central to research, anthropology

has an opportunity to interrogate and understand the educational experience. We also have an opportunity to engage young people into becoming critical, self-aware, and interested citizens, participating in a reflexive and open relationship with their world. WP for anthropology is not just about attracting a wider audience to university study; it is an issue of challenging the function of WP, and how it can contribute to closing gaps in equality.

In leaning towards Harwood et al.'s conclusion that WP needs to become a "felt extension of existing learning cultures to which young people belong" (2017, p188), I have been pondering how this might be achieved. In an education environment, especially in a world affected by COVID-19, my students' experiences offer a valuable ground for consideration, since location and social interactions have become more complex. To achieve belonging requires inclusion, a voice, a place and value within it, and anthropology is the perfect subject for this.

For example, I propose that providing opportunities for young people to engage with different educational practices to explore culture can be a transformative experience; we shouldn't just measure whether they then apply for further study, even though that will undoubtedly remain an objective. When, as a teacher, I set ethnographic research projects for homework, pupils love it. One project I set up, an open-ended research project asking students to explore the links between schools rules and behaviour, (in a class which had up to that point achieved around a 30% homework hand-in rate) was so popular, every single student made the deadline. Even two popular students, who generally found themselves in trouble and hardly ever completed work fully, handed in well-presented findings, and articulated interesting insights into the impact of uniform strictness and the arbitrariness of toilet rules. They did not conform in their beliefs, but they did engage with the framework to have a voice. WP can literally be broadening social experiences to create empathy, understanding, and importantly, space to be heard.

This idea can be extended to think about how our subject can offer fulfilment and enrichment of school curricula. We could create mini-ethnographic projects to be used as homework that could expand learning skills and encourage empathy and understanding of complex current affairs. It would give students permission to conceive of their world from alternative perspectives without undermining their own sometimes vulnerable position.
We can offer anthologies of ethnographic extracts, chosen thematically or conceptually, to create thought-provoking non-fiction texts for English and humanities teachers. This would provide interesting new topics and new voices to contribute to decolonising curricula. We can distribute well-differentiated teaching materials and examples through digital download.

Beyond the classroom, we could use webinars and video technology to run WP from distant locations, answering questions, and listening to student voices too. WP is as much about hearing from young people as it is about showing what we do at university. We must be more than an exhibit.
Additionally, we can organise national events to be consumed locally in schools, and provide links for streamed lectures that are well-differentiated for consumption. This could be part of exciting competitions to publish writing, podcasts, artwork, photo galleries, and ethnographic films.

But to ensure these are appropriate, we need to accept we must employ school-teachers, and perhaps even pupils, in the production of these materials to ensure they are appropriately engaging and are consumable through appropriate pedagogical methods. Otherwise we could run the risk of creating barriers to this new form of WP, such as inaccessible literacy levels, unachievable workloads, or requiring too many resources.

I could continue offering suggestions, but they are not just for me to decide. Ultimately, I propose that rather than inviting young people into our universities, a place symbolic with authority and an activity laden with obstacles, we open WP for investigation and research. In turn, we might also learn more about the experiences of disadvantage around the UK, the importance of familiarity, how to facilitate successful WP, and how to make university study and anthropology a viable choice. Hopefully, those students we do attract to study will arrive with a diverse, empowered mindset. They won't look to change the system; they will be the change.

Notes

[i] Disadvantaged is an official term used by the English education system to identify students from low-income families, and students who are 'looked after', such as adopted children. Low-income families are typically identified by receiving free school meals any time over a six year period.

[ii] Cultural capital is currently a central focus in curriculum planning in schools, and it is explicitly referenced in the new Ofsted Framework. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/801429/Education_inspection_framework.pdf. Some critics, such as Phil Beadle (2020), argue this sociological term is being used incorrectly.
[iii] Black, Asian, and minority ethnic persons. I use BAME because that is the term in the policy for widening participation as outlined by the government.
[iv] Gifted and Talented, or More Able as it is often now referred to, is a title that is given to the most able students who have achieved specific measures at key stage 2 testing (aged 10-11 years).
[v] Out of school / out of the classroom to attend a different event.

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