

Dr Talita M.L. Calitz
University of the Free State

Prof Melanie Walker
University of the Free State

Dr Merridy Wilson-Strydom
University of the Free State

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Theorising a capability approach to equal participation for undergraduate students at a South African university

Abstract

This article applies a capability approach to the problem of unequal participation for working-class, first-generation students at a South African university. Even though access to higher education institutions is increasing for historically excluded students, when race and class disaggregate completion rates, there are persistent patterns of unequal participation. In the first part of the article, the capability approach is used to conceptualise dimensions of equal participation, which include resources, agency, recognition and practical reason. In the second part of the paper, these four principles are applied to an empirical case study, which is drawn from a longitudinal research project that tracked the equality of participation of undergraduate university students at a South African university. The article makes the case for pedagogical and institutional arrangements that enable equal participation for students who are precariously positioned at higher education institutions.

Keywords: *Equal participation; access and success; socio-economic class; capabilities approach; higher education*

1. Introduction: Contextualising participation at South African universities

Equitable access to higher education remains elusive to many South African university students, as illustrated by recent protests about rising tuition fees (Chetty, 2016). Yet despite an increasingly representative student body, when completion rates are disaggregated by race and class, cohort studies confirm that black and coloured¹ students also remain most vulnerable to uneven patterns of success once they gain university admission (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014: 32; see also Council on Higher Education, 2013). These students also have a significantly higher chance of leaving university before completing their qualification. This exclusion is exacerbated for first-generation students, who are the first person in their

¹ While we do not subscribe to any racial classifications, the persistence of racialised classification in South Africa means that the participant data reflected these categories.

immediate family to attend university, while also facing the resource scarcity associated with poverty (CHE, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2015). In an unequal society such as South Africa, participation in higher education could potentially increase opportunities for university graduates to participate socially and economically, thereby narrowing extreme socio-economic inequalities (Lozano *et al.*, 2012). However, these opportunities are constrained by systemic arrangements that leave a significant number of poor and working-class students less likely to benefit from higher education.

Influenced in part by a poorly -resourced public school system alongside these deepening inequalities, first-generation and socio-economically vulnerable students in particular find it difficult to make a successful transition from school to university (Pym & Kapp, 2013). Another reason for unequal participation is that students from under-resourced schools are often subjected to remedial interventions based on deficit assumptions, which alienate them from participation at university (Hlalele & Alexander, 2012; Boughey, 2010). The recent protests also confirmed that many students do not feel welcome within university cultures, which therefore positions their exclusion at the intersection of resource deprivation and status injury (Fraser, 2008; Nkopo, 2015; see also Archer & Hutchings, 2000). In response to deficit approaches that further marginalise students our capability-informed theorisation of equal participation is transformative in its critical evaluation of structural arrangements, cultures and hierarchies that perpetuate unjust conditions. Our theorisation of equal participation also incorporates Nancy Fraser's critique of affirmative approaches that address unequal structural arrangements without "disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" (Fraser, 2008: 82). We return to a more detailed discussion of the capability framework in the theoretical section of the article.

Research problem

In response to the structural problems outlined above, higher education policy has prioritised access and success as crucial targets aimed at redressing historical injustice, social segregation and economic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). Yet while these are important goals, the research problem outlined in the article is that neither a representative student demographic nor academic outcomes are sufficient indicators of whether students have equal opportunities to benefit from academic resources and opportunities offered by university education. Our research problem is summarised by the following question: given these structural inequalities within universities, how could student experiences of pedagogical and institutional arrangements inform a theorisation of equal participation, defined as students' freedom to convert available resources into equal academic participation? In order to address the research problem, our argument will be developed in two separate parts. In this first section of the paper, we conceptualise equal participation using Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum's (2011) capability approach as a normative theory of justice. Drawing on this capability-informed definition, we then illustrate four specific dimensions of equal participation using a qualitative case study. The individual case study was part of a broader research project in which we tracked the experiences of first-generation and working-class undergraduate students on an extended degree programme. In the case study, we draw attention to the pedagogical and institutional arrangements that enabled or constrained participants' freedom to convert available opportunities and resources at the university into expanded participation.

Research questions

In response to the research problem, our study framed the following three research questions. Firstly, we wanted to understand how pedagogical and institutional arrangements at university enabled and constrained the conversion of resources into capabilities for equal participation. The second research question investigated how a capability-informed theory of participation could contribute to addressing remediable injustices at the *intersection* of institutional structures and individual agency. Our final research question explored how student experiences could be used as evidence to inform the design of capability praxis for equal participation. In response to these questions, we evaluated existing capabilities and functionings in order to interrogate whether the structural arrangements in higher education, including the distribution of resources, were fair and just. We now move our attention to the theoretical framework used to conduct the research, which is described in the section below.

2. Theoretical framing: The capability approach and equal participation

The first part of our argument proposes a capability-informed definition of participation. As a point of departure, we foreground the way that structural arrangements influence students' freedom for participation in higher education. Based on the assumption that persistent patterns of unequal participation and success are remediable injustices that require a sustained response from institutions (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015), the capability approach offers a structural critique of arrangements that expand or constrain students' freedom for equal participation. Originally conceptualised by economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the capability approach has been theorised and operationalised as a multidimensional theory of justice (Robeyns, 2006). In essence, the capability approach is an evaluative platform for interpersonal assessments of human development, framed as the expansion of individual freedom and well-being (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). As an approach to justice, the capability approach examines individual well-being by taking into account the actual freedoms that are available to the individual (Sen, 1999). While an individual's capability set could bear some relation to resources and income, this is an incomplete measure of the actual opportunities available to the individual (Sen, 2009: 253). Therefore, instead of focusing solely on income or access to resources, the capability approach evaluates whether an individual is able to *convert* available resources into capabilities or functionings. A capability is defined as the freedoms or genuine opportunities available to an individual, such as being literate or knowledgeable (Nussbaum, 2011). The realisation of a capability is defined as a functioning (Nussbaum, 2011: 25), which is defined as an active 'doing', such as using the capability of one's voice to speak confidently in a classroom. A functioning could also be a state of 'being' where a capability has been realised, such as being a critically educated citizen, or being an academically literate student.

Freedom of choice is central to the notion of capabilities and functionings because people should be free to choose the functionings that they have reason to value, once they have achieved the capability (Nussbaum, 2011: 25). Drawing on Sen's notion of development as the practice of freedom, our theorisation of equal participation makes the case for education as a bundle of choices, freedoms and opportunities to which each individual student should have equitable access (Sen, 1999). In our analysis of student experience, we wanted to understand how an individual's access to higher education, while taking into account her bundle of resources, was converted into valuable capabilities and functionings.

This capability-informed conceptualisation of participation deepens our understanding of the constraints that first-generation and working-class students face in their every-day experiences of the institution. In this paper, equal participation is positioned on a spectrum where on the one end, an individual has access to the resources and opportunities needed to achieve the outcomes associated with academic participation. On the other end of the spectrum, an individual may have physical access to the university but without the accompanying resources and opportunities to achieve the same outcomes as the privileged peer. This model of participation is therefore critical of access debates that measure transformation in higher education as increasing student numbers, without simultaneously interrogating the conditions under which participation is enabled or constrained. We argue that while quantifiable outcomes such as test scores and student behaviour are important for measuring some aspects of academic participation, these indicators of success are insufficient to make sense of the complexity of participation. For example, we found evidence of students performing relatively well in formal assessment but whose overall opportunities for participation were diminished by institutional alienation, poverty and discriminatory pedagogical practices.

In research on widening participation, working-class students' aspirations are often expressed as being stuck or having limited freedom to direct their lives towards valued outcomes, such as decent employment, safety, respect and dignity (see also Archer & Hutchings, 2000). In response to this concern, we used our capability lens to examine how individual agency was constrained by structural conditions, while foregrounding how an individual student used her agency to negotiate structural barriers (Sen, 1999). With its emphasis on individual agency, freedom and well-being, we found that the capability approach enabled us to look beneath the surface of individual experiences at the freedoms and opportunities that were available within the institution to students with a smaller bundle of recognised resources. In our project, expanded freedom expands the range of opportunities from which people can choose (Sen, 2009). This means for instance that higher education should expand the freedom that students have to choose between opportunities by expanding their freedom to exercise agency in the pursuit of lives that they have reason to value.

3. Methodology: Introducing the case study

We now turn to our case study, situated at a traditional South African university. The institution is a historically white, Afrikaans-medium institution, although the student body is increasingly representative of the South African demographic, with black students constituting a majority of the undergraduate student cohort. However, as is the case across the higher education sector, there is a significant achievement gap between black and white students, which this institution has identified as one of its strategic interventions. This inequality of academic outcomes is not the only constraint to equitable participation. During the national student protests at South African universities in October 2015, students raised concerns about unjust structural conditions that make it difficult for them to participate as valued members of the institution. During these national #FeesMustFall protests, students and contract workers challenged escalating tuition fees alongside the outsourced labour practices adopted by higher education institutions (see Chetty, 2016). Some of the issues highlighted by these protests are relevant to a broader student community. However, protests against escalating fees bear particular relevance to the lives of black, working class students, whose families are less able to provide financial support for tuition fees, textbooks, meals, transport and accommodation. Other pertinent concerns are the university's language policy, the quality

of teaching and learning, the integration of commuter students into student life, access to learning facilities and persistent patterns of race- and gender-based discrimination.

The case study explored in this paper is part of a longitudinal research project in which we investigated the experiences of undergraduate students. Our sample included students who are vulnerable to unequal participation because of socio-economic class, race- and gender-based discrimination (see also Unterhalter, 2003). We wanted student experiences to broaden our understanding of what happens within the walls of the university once students have entered the university gates (see also Boughey & Bozalek, 2012). The longitudinal research project was conducted at a South African university described above, between August 2013 and March 2015. The research project was organised into two distinct phases. During the first phase [August 2013-November 2013], the principal researcher conducted individual interviews [N = 20], facilitated digital narrative workshops [N = 4], and assisted with the production of digital narratives [N = 8]. Digital narratives were chosen as a data collection tool that could expand students' freedom to frame and narrate their experiences using creative multimedia forms. The narratives were conceptualised, designed and produced in a series of four collaborative workshops and individual production sessions. The data emerging from the research process informed an iterative process of data analysis, from which the primary researcher and the student co-researchers then distilled the foundational principles associated with our definition of equal participation. During the second phase, conducted from March 2014 and concluding in March 2015, we intensified the participatory nature of the research and involved the participants as co-researchers by offering fertile opportunities for research engagement and collaboration, such as seminars and public dissemination events (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013; see also Mertens, 2008).

The individual case study presented in the next section reports on the experiences of Condorrera², one of the research participants, who was a final-year student at the time of the research. We decided to focus on Condorrera's narrative because she represents the population of female, black, first-generation, working-class student, many of whom remain particularly vulnerable to weakened participation and academic exclusion³. She was a first-generation student from a working-class background, thus her socio-economic status has been influenced by social and economic segregation under apartheid. Therefore, her family was unable to afford university tuition making her dependent on a government bursary to cover tuition and basic subsistence. She was registered on an extended degree programme, which is an access or bridging programme intended to include students with lower high-school leaving scores that offer academic development courses that aim to prepare students for the requirements of university study. Another reason for drawing on her experiences is to illustrate that despite these challenges, she was a relatively high-achieving student who negotiated the environment with confidence. Her experiences demonstrate how these dimensions of participation are applicable to students with varying degrees of participation.

² This is a pseudonym.

³ Although we do not claim that Condorrera's experiences are generalisable across this student demographic, we have found similar experiences of exclusion across the qualitative data, which other empirical research has also confirmed.

4. Discussion: Four dimensions of equal participation⁴

The four dimensions of equal participation discussed in this section are framed at the intersection of the individual's internal capabilities and structural conditions that enabled or constrained the freedom for participation. When applied in practice, the dimensions are intended to create pedagogical and institutional conditions in which vulnerable university students have a more equitable opportunity for academic participation. As discussed earlier, the four dimensions of participation explored in the following section have been distilled from the theorisation of the capability approach. These dimensions include resources, agency, recognition and practical reason. Using Condorrera's narrative, we illustrate instances where these dimensions led to positive outcomes and where their absence diminished participation.

Based on the assumption that participation is inadequately captured as entry into higher education and is only partially captured by measurable outcomes, the dimensions of equal participation proposed in this paper respond to the following questions: how did pedagogical and institutional structural arrangements expand and constrain participants' freedom to participate equally? How did participants navigate the academic demands of university study? Finally, did students have access to support structures that allowed them to convert available academic resources such as knowledge into the capabilities and functionings required for academic success?

Resources

The first dimension of participation is concerned with equitable access to academic resources such as textbooks, photocopies and the Internet and other basic resources such as food, transport and accommodation. Yet because of an uneven distribution of resources, working-class students often negotiate a competitive academic environment with smaller resource bundles, which makes it difficult for them to participate. Our evaluation of resource access draws on research that reveals how class differences create significant forms of marginalisation and exclusion from academic participation (Reay *et al.*, 2001; see also Ball, 2004).

At the same time, an important assumption embedded in the capability approach is that "[e]quality of resources falls short because it fails to take account of the fact that individuals need differing levels of resources if they are to come up to the same level of capability to function" (Nussbaum, 2003: 35). This means that students with less academic preparation before university and less reliable access to basic resources such as transport, food and health care may need a more sustained resource threshold to convert opportunities at university into capabilities and functionings (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010: 66). Yet because of dwindling state funding, the resources needed to ensure a resource threshold are increasingly precarious (Bozzoli, 2015).

In the case study, Condorrera relied on limited financial support from her family, which meant that the absence of adequate resources was a recurring theme in her experiences. In our analysis, resource scarcity left working-class participants vulnerable to unequal participation (Dos Santos, 2005), which is highlighted in Condorrera's quote below:

University is hard. And going to university requires financial support, which most of us don't have. Some students say I don't have money or financially I'm not stable. If I could get [a job] now, why waste four years of my time to failing and having financial problems to get this done?

4 Other dimensions that were not included due to space constraints include critical literacies, affiliation, values for the public good and student research.

Closely related to resource availability, we interrogated whether participants had real opportunities to convert available resources into capabilities or opportunities and functionings or valued outcomes. For example, even when Condorrera was able to afford an important resource such as a textbook, if pedagogical conditions in her university courses were not conducive to learning (for example, crowded classrooms or insufficient support from lecturers or tutors), then the resource could remain static and underutilised, thereby diminishing her freedom for participation.

We also interpreted academic interaction as resources that could be converted into the capability for knowledge. In another example, Condorrera explained that pedagogical arrangements sometimes made it difficult to engage meaningfully with knowledge. In the quote below, she described her observations of disengaged peers who despite having access to academic resources, could not convert these opportunities into learning:

[Being interested] has to come from, the course itself. Listening to the lectures, doing what is expected, and seeing that you are going somewhere with this. You know, when you're passing in class, it means you're making progress. But if you're not, it's going to discourage you. So if you're not interested in a subject, you're not going to go to class, you're not going to do well, you're not going to research, you're not going to bother about it. You're either going to drop it, or get it over and done with.

Her example illustrated the importance of pedagogical conditions in which students can cultivate capabilities required for learning. For instance, Condorrera negotiated these systemic constraints by affiliating herself with supportive peers and lecturers, which enabled her to maintain an interest in learning throughout her degree programme. In our analysis of her experiences, it was striking how she used reflexive observation to navigate frequently unwelcoming pedagogical arrangements, while some of her younger and less experienced research participants did not have the same freedom and remained disengaged from learning.

Agency

The next dimension of participation is the agency that individuals use to negotiate injustices within higher education (McKenna, 2010). The case study revealed how important it was to recognise individual agency and to ensure that individual students had sustained platforms to make their agency visible. Furthermore, the capability approach holds that people must have the freedom to play an active role in the process of their education instead of passively receiving remedial interventions (Sen, 1999: 281). As such, the notion of *agency freedom* defines a student's position within the university community as the freedom that s/he has to make choices and to claim access to real alternatives (Sen, 1999).

In this study, agency is framed as a meta-construct underlying our approach to equal participation. However, the qualitative findings suggested that agency freedom is also a dimension of equal participation in its own right, framed as the freedom to choose between opportunities that the individual student has reason to value. For this reason, agency cuts across our theory of equal participation as an important meta-construct underlying equal participation. Here, agency freedom is comprised of two interrelated yet distinct aspects: the individual's *opportunity* to pursue valued outcomes and the *process* underlying the pursuit of the opportunities (Sen, 2009: 228). We frame agency as an opportunity to individual valued freedoms and the process aspect in which having agency means access to fair and equitable structural procedures (Sen, 2009: 296). Given the systemic inequalities in educational provision, the process aspect of freedom is important in evaluating how individuals negotiate

pedagogical and institutional arrangements that diminish student freedom (Hart, 2013). For example, if an individual student is able to use their agency to attend a lecture, this should be accompanied by pedagogical and institutional processes and cultures within the classroom that are conducive to meaningful engagement with knowledge so that the individual is able to cultivate critical academic capabilities.

Condorrera identified the university's language policy as a structural barrier that she negotiated in order to access English as the language of instruction. Her freedom was diminished in comparison to students who spoke either English or Afrikaans as their home language. The consequence of this arrangement was that she had to work harder to access knowledge and frequently felt alienated from lecturers and peers. Although Condorrera was able to access university instruction as a measurable *outcome*, the implications of learning in English was part of a *process* of adjusting to a structural inequality, as she explained below:

You need English to cope academically. At school, the structure of learning was different, a mix of English and Setswana. We have the right to learn in our own language, but in reality it can't be done...The fact that you give up the right to speak your own language when you enter university, it's really big. You have no choice but to do that.

The structural inequality embedded in the language policy was that the majority of black students were instructed in English, while some white students could choose between either English or Afrikaans instruction, which offered Afrikaans-speaking students the advantage of being instructed in their home language. In the quotes below, Condorrera was reflexive about the connection between language, identity development and access to English as a language of instruction:

I have realised that my peers communicate to me mostly in English....I don't want to associate with people who don't know their own language. They see the importance of knowing English but they don't realise the importance of knowing their own language.

In response to pedagogical arrangements that did not recognise her home language as a valued resource, she created an alternative platform to negotiate the university environment with multilingual capabilities. However, the structural arrangements complicated access to learning and demanded additional academic resources that were not equally available to all students.

Recognition

The third dimension of equal participation draws on Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of recognition, which is situated within her theory of justice alongside claims for economic redistribution⁵ (Fraser, 2000: 110). In expanding the focus on identity, Fraser defines recognition as "the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2000: 113). The duality of status and redistribution makes this framework responsive to an absence of material resources exacerbated by the *mis*recognition of working-class students' social, cultural and emotional resources (Fraser, 2000). In this article, we have

5 For the purpose of this article, we have focused on two of Fraser's three R's: redistribution (of resources) and recognition. We have explicitly drawn on her theorisation of recognition as discussed above. With our focus on socio-economically disadvantaged university students, we have implicitly incorporated her principle of economic redistribution. Fraser's third R is representation, which she defines as the capacity to possess political voice, particularly within the precarious marginality in which asylum seekers and refugees navigate precarious claims for legitimacy and voice (Fraser, 2013). Due to space constraints, we have not incorporated this third R into our analysis in this article.

adapted Fraser's notion of recognition to our analysis of student experiences as an analytical tool that challenges the structural biases that misrecognise students who face socio-economic constraints (Fraser, 2000).

In the case study, we found evidence across participant experiences of what Fraser describes as "institutionalised value patterns cast some people as advantaged, as normal, as respected, and others as disadvantaged, as pathological, as unworthy of respect" (Bozalek, 2012: 146). These patterns were evident in pedagogical practices that pushed students to the margins and positioned them as outsiders within the institution. Condorrera had expressed concern that this misrecognition of ability affected her own and her peers' academic participation:

Our lecturer said, "Well, you're going to write this test and I don't feel that one of you is going to pass. I don't see even one of you getting five percent for this test". So when we left this class, this guy said, "I didn't like the comment he made. It means he doesn't have confidence in us". So he should have actually told us what to do to nail the test. But in fact, he didn't. And if you see a person is getting 50 percent, or a 60, at least that is something that they can still improve. So it's not like we were failing. And the test that he was referring to, none of us failed that test. It's just that the passing rate was not what he expected. But had he told us what he wanted, and how he prefers us to answer his questions, maybe we could have done better.

In the example above, instead of offering support, the threat of failure created anxiety and diminished morale, which was not conducive to participation, especially for students already positioned precariously at the institution. Condorrera also called attention to pedagogical conditions in which misrecognition positioned her as a vulnerable student with less potential for academic achievement and narrated an incident of a lecturer's deficit perception of working-class students,

[T]he lecturer said, one of the doctors ... "Some of you when I'm sitting here, I can see that you have a lot of problems. Hence, you cannot even perform well." Then I said: No, how come you're saying you see problems? You are supposed to see beyond that. If you can make it to this point, whether we have problems or not, hungry or not, it means we are willing to do something about our lives, regardless of that. It means we are able to put aside any problems that we have, to make it here.

But if you can still see that [the problems], it means now we're not going to achieve what we came here for. So, that has always been my question – what do they see in us? Because that's what he saw in us.

Condorrera's experiences above connect an absence of recognition with diminished academic participation. This calls attention to the need for arrangements that simultaneously take into account the way that resource scarcity could diminish learning, while avoiding a deficit perception of student potential. While Condorrera actively resisted this deficit gaze, we found evidence in other participant narratives that the opportunity to resist a deficit approach was not available to the same extent to other students. A concerning commonality across both these instances was that instead of enabling participation, the arrangements in the classroom eroded the freedom for participation.

A final aspect of recognition was "the need for the people affected to participate in deciding what they want and what they have reason to accept" (Sen, 1999: 32), which means giving individuals greater *control and autonomy* in processes that directly affect their ability to participate (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). In Condorrera's narrative, she related numerous

examples where she was given autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge, which then expanded her engagement with learning over time. In our analysis of these examples, this required recognition of the individual voice that was frequently denied to marginalised students, whose experiences of schooling may not have equipped them to demand just structural arrangements (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). In our definition, the aim of recognition is to create a more horizontal process of deliberation, so that all students have access to conditions under which they can develop the capability for voice. While it was encouraging to observe how Condorrera claimed available platforms for voice, she reiterated our findings across the data that comparatively few students in our sample had access to the same freedom.

Practical reason

The final dimension of equal participation distilled from the qualitative data was the capability for practical reason, which has been identified as a central capability for participation by a number of capability scholars (Flores-Crespo, 2007; Nussbaum, 2011). The capability for practical reason encompasses the importance of epistemological access and its relation to student engagement with disciplinary knowledge, as valued members of an academic community (McLean, 2009; Morrow, 2009). Our capabilities-informed definition of practical reason was also a critical response to the instrumentalism of measurable outcomes in higher education policy and pedagogical arrangements that individualise academic failure or success (Nussbaum, 2010).

In this definition, practical reason was identified as a capability in its own right with the potential to expand the freedom for equal participation (Flores-Crespo, 2007). We found evidence of such reasoning in Condorrera's engagement with university courses that her peers reported as 'boring' or a 'waste of time', where she converted access to information into engagement with knowledge:

Going to class is not about writing a test. You explore the learning environment of what [course] is about, so you get to learn other things. There were other topics that we have to discuss in class. So listening to other people's views is very interesting.

The theoretical connection between Freire's critical pedagogy and the capability approach was particularly fertile for theorising the capability for practical reason because of the central role of reasoned deliberation in both approaches. Freire envisioned critical education in which people "perceive themselves in a dialectical relationship with their social reality" towards the active transformation of this reality (Freire, 1973: 34). Nussbaum (2011: 34) defines practical reason as "[b]eing able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life", as illustrated by Condorrera's reflection below:

I want to leave university knowing I'm equipped in this and that. So I'll be able to tell others about digital narrative...about the importance of knowing your own language, and what it's like being at university.

During the research process, she demonstrated how access to knowledge expanded her aspirations for meeting the needs of her family, in particular family members who are hearing impaired, which motivated her specialisation in South African Sign Language. In the quotations below, Condorrera employed practical reason to position herself as an agent who converted knowledge into concern for the public good, in response to unemployment and exclusion that affect members of her community:

[Language] is big. It's beautiful... Actually the course itself made me realise, that language itself is even bigger than what we see. People are just sitting at home doing nothing; they can actually make money with their own language. They can become editors of their own language. They can translate. They can train other non-speakers to speak.

As we see above, in Freire's model of education as the practice of freedom, the condition for transformative dialogue and participation includes the capacity for critical thought (Freire, 1970: 23). Throughout her experiences at university, Condorrera identified her ability for critical reasoning as crucial to her engagement with knowledge by "using reflection, information, [and] understanding" to the end of capability development (Flores-Crespo, 2007: 49). Conceived as such, the capability for practical reason expands the agency of the student acting upon her social world by using educational resources to develop critical consciousness.

5. Conclusion

We have argued for a theorisation of equal participation that consists of four dimensions, which were applied to a qualitative case study. The study aimed to deepen our understanding of equal participation in the experiences of a working-class, first-generation student on an extended degree programme. Another aim of our capability-informed approach was to reimagine structural arrangements that enable equal participation for all students, particularly for those situated precariously within institutions. We conclude the paper with some final reflections on structural constraints to participation. Our analysis showed that Condorrera used agency to negotiate participation by converting personal and social dimensions of agency into functionings – or valued ways of being and doing. Therefore, a capabilities-informed response to unequal participation should focus on providing pedagogical and institutional arrangements that recognise individual agency while avoiding a deficit approach to students making the transition to university.

The findings above suggest the need for further research that involves working-class students in deliberative processes. We base this assumption on the evidence within Condorrera's experiences that an agency-focused approach could provide practitioners and educators with evaluative tools for responding to patterns of unequal participation. In addition, our analysis suggests that support structures for vulnerable students could be enriched by taking into account how accumulative injustices constrain students' freedom to convert educational resources into capabilities and functionings. The design of support structures could also be informed by student-focused insight into the structural reasons why students are less likely to benefit from existing support structures. It is our hope that a nuanced understanding of unequal participation could contribute to pedagogical practices and student support interventions that are increasingly responsive to the complex and implicit forms of exclusion that constrain equal participation for marginalised university students.

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