

# Studenthood and identification: higher education as a liminal transitional space

John Field and Natalie Morgan-Klein, University of Stirling, Scotland

What does it mean to be a student in a period of mass higher education? A growing number of researchers in post-compulsory education and training have explored questions of identity as a significant dimension of the learning experience (Tedder and Biesta 2009; Merrill 2009). This paper provides a conceptual discussion of studenthood as a way of understanding the ways in which student identities are related to participation and retention. Studenthood refers here to the variety of different ways in which registering for an education programme is implicated in people's sense of who they are.

Studenthood is a distinctive form of identity because educational programmes themselves are almost invariably associated with transition. The formal status of being a "student" is relatively clear cut in higher education, where people are required to undergo prescribed procedures which clearly designate them as being students. The status of student is also a transitory status, after which most will expect to become something else – a graduate, who will enjoy graduate status in a credentialist labour market.

We can therefore see higher education not only as a transitional space, but as being "liminal". This idea derives from the work of the social anthropologist, Victor Turner (1987), on tribal peoples who are in the midst of a passage from one status role to another. There are obvious reasons why Turner's idea of liminality cannot be transferred unproblematically to the types of status transition that are experienced in a very different type of society. Nevertheless, we argue, it is possible to draw on and develop Turner's work in thinking of a critical theory of retention.

## **Turner and the liminal persona**

Liminality, in Turner's work, refers to what he calls "an interstructural situation" that is experienced by people undergoing a rite of passage. He was particularly interested in those elements of ritual, instruction and symbolism that expressed concepts of the "interstructural human", believing that they would help to inform a model of society as a "structure of positions" (Turner 1987, 4).

For those within the rite of passage, Turner argued, their identity is neither that of the old nor that of the new. "Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary identities", he wrote, and may in some societies even involve "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise". So although a structuralist, he certainly was not a simple functionalist. Rather, he accepted that initiation rituals may conserve the status quo, but equally may also generate new thought and new custom (Turner 1987, 7).

Turner linked the generative capacity of this role to its very marginality. Liminal personae were often separated physically from the rest of society, whether by isolation and distance or by symbolic disguises such as masks. Often, he noted, they

have no possessions and their relations with others are characterised by attributes of “structural invisibility”. Yet particularly where these rites are collective, Turner thought that there was likely to be complete equality among neophytes, transcending all other distinctions. The neophytes themselves tended to form life-long bonds. Once more, Turner saw this as the production of “interstructural liminality”, where the initiands were not enacting institutionalised roles, yet nevertheless were performing the values of the common good (Turner 1987, 9-11).

Turner conceptualised his work in the context of what he saw as small scale, stable, cyclical societies. It would be wrong to take his ideas as a conceptual template that can be applied, unchanged, to the higher education systems of larger scale, fast-changing and multi-linear societies of the advanced capitalist nations. Just to take one obvious example, Turner presents data on relations between instructors and initiands that were typified by complete submission and obedience (Turner 1987, 9). Whatever we may think about the hierarchical nature of contemporary higher education, these are hardly likely to be its typical characteristics. Nevertheless, some of Turner’s insights may be helpful in enabling us to understand the processes of identification within contemporary higher education.

### **Habitus and disposition in higher education**

Researchers have paid considerable attention to the interplay between student identity and institutional culture in higher education. In particular, a number of writers have drawn on Bourdieu’s thinking to examine the relations between habitus, disposition and various capitals in higher education systems. Diane Reay and others have examined the way in which the institutional habitus of higher education is typically welcoming for those whose dispositions are formed in environments rich in cultural and social capital; and equally alienating for those whose dispositions may not include the values, attitudes and tastes that are valued not only by academics and administrators but also by other students (Reay et al 2005).

The RANLHE project is particularly concerned with ‘non-traditional students’. This is, of course, a troubling notion, which has been hotly debated within the project team. We chose it largely because we thought it likely to be meaningful to a non-research audience, including those who are participating in the study. Yet although defining a group of people by what they are not is inherently risky, it can also highlight the non-normative nature of the group’s attributes. In this case, it points to the ways in which some students’ dispositions are characterised by their exposure to forms of capital – social and cultural – that have limited value within higher education.

Bourdieu’s work is clearly valuable in exposing the deep social and cultural roots of contemporary inequalities and injustices in higher education. This is not to say that his ideas have always been applied thoughtfully; as Reay herself remarks (2004), some researchers have taken a somewhat superficial and mechanistic view of Bourdieu’s work, so that his theory sometimes appears little more than a respectably high-faluting Marxism.

Moreover, in some respects his work is now dated. While higher education systems may well reflect and reproduce inequalities, Bourdieu’s fieldwork was undertaken in a particular context. The habitus that characterised the French *grandes écoles* during the 1960s is very different from the habitus of a mass higher education

system in early twenty-first century Britain. The cultural assumptions and norms of French elites in the 1960s that underpinned Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and taste have been shattered, not least by the youth movements (and associated consumer markets) of that and subsequent decades. Cultural tastes and dispositions may be derived from and express a variety of pluralistic solidarities associated with generation, ethnicity and gender as much as, or even more than, socio-economic class.

The massification of higher education is particularly significant for our understanding of the importance of studenthood as identity. The Finnish scholar Tapio Aittola has drawn attention to the socio-cultural importance of mass higher education, arguing that while the status and identity of student was highly distinctive and appealing during the phase of elite higher education, university study has now become the normal route for young people. As Aittola says, apart from anything else, one result is that going to university increasingly feels like an extension of school (Aittola 1995). As well as the subjective dimension, there is some evidence that the value of university credentials is less clear cut in a period of mass higher education, which in turn is likely to have a subjective dimension.

### **Studenthood as a liminal status**

In a mass higher education system, student status is also a liminal status. In Turner's words, it is an institutionalised status that is explicitly betwixt and between two other statuses. It is bounded by time, as well as by prescribed criteria of entrance and exit. It is also inherently a temporary status.

The temporality of education is rarely investigated by researchers (for an exception see Allan and Lewis 2009). Yet it is an important aspect of higher education's liminal nature. Students must constantly interact with staff and departments that constantly present the learner's status as student, and symbolically reinforce the learner's formal status as student. Inevitably, though, this is a formal status with a clear time scale: as well as a date of initial registration and at least a 'normal' date of graduation, there are timetables for attendance, deadlines for assessments, time limits on passing from one level to another. You might feel yourself to be a student all your adult days, but the university regulations will always draw a line.

It follows that studenthood will always be a provisional identity. Learners will build their sense of studenthood over time, in the knowledge that it has prescribed temporal boundaries. These temporal milestones are often associated with ceremonies and ritual, from the symbolic practices of assessment to the grand opera of graduation. All of these organise and reinforce the transitional nature of studenthood.

So studenthood is always a temporary identity. And drawing on Bourdieusian analyses of higher education, one explanation of retention is to do with the students' dispositions. These will include the nature of studenthood – that is, the ways in which the learner thinks of themselves as being a student, including the extent to which they develop an identity as a student. At its crudest, we would expect retention rates to be higher among those who have a well-developed sense of themselves as fitting the role of student. They will be comfortable and confident with the identity of studenthood.

Conversely, the non traditional learner is likely to experience the role of student as a marginal one, as a cause of discomfort, or as inconsistent with other established identities. Far from integration into a cohesive group of what Turner calls “initiators” they are more likely to develop a ‘relational identity’ that can account for subjective feelings of being isolated and out-of-place. When this is overlaid by epistemological obstacles, such non-normative students may resort to “mimicry” of the cultural and educational capital that they see in others; or they may simply see themselves as in a “stuck place” (Meyer and Land 2005, 373). Where learners are able to master the epistemological challenges of the discipline, they may equally resort to celebration of their distinctiveness.

Studenthood will also involve imagined futures. Learner identities will be expressed through, and also shaped by, different ways of seeing the future self. One of our interviewees spoke openly about imagining herself engaging in a conversation with middle class friends, while maintaining her existing family ties. Again, this is associated with the transitory nature of the student role. The growing financial commitments incurred by study, combined with evidence of a slowly falling return on graduate status, will affect imagined futures. It is not clear, though, whether these trends are likely to erode the learner’s emotional investment in their transitional student identity, or encourage them to make conscious efforts to hang in and complete.

Interviews with mature students showed ways in which participating in higher education had changed their sense of who they were – in particular, of their own capability and worth. A new sense of themselves as capable of learning and accordingly, the opening up of new possibilities for self-fulfilment both in the present and in future was a recurring theme. Often this was important to their continuation as students – though support both practical and emotional from family and friends, as well as academic staff, were other key factors highlighted, indicating the relationship between dispositional factors and those relating to external circumstances – such as family responsibilities – in student retention.

These are, of course, rather general remarks. Studenthood will vary considerably between different groups of non-traditional learner. Generational differences, for example, may mean that mature students still view university life as an exceptionally privileged experience, while young non-traditional students may see it – as Aittola suggests – as a slightly grown up version of school. Gender differences will also play themselves out, though in increasingly complex ways as the gender balance of students (and increasingly staff) shifts away from traditional patterns of patriarchal domination.

Studenthood may also be expected to vary between different types of university, and within universities between different disciplines. In her study of mature students in a research university, Kasworm found that respectful connections with academic faculty were particularly important in learners’ co-construction of their relational identities (Kasworm 2010, 153-5). Of course, there may be a generational dimension to this pattern. Kasworm nonetheless suggests that the search for authenticity and legitimacy within the cultural context of a research university is likely to be different from that of a high-access, community based college, and that this is likely to impact upon learner identity.

## Conclusions

The idea of constructing a critical theory of retention is ambitious. It is particularly zealous, even utopian, to suppose that the building blocks can be made from such diverse material as social anthropology, critical theory, social theory and psychoanalysis. Perhaps, confronted with this challenge, some might decide to drop out – as a positive step of self-realisation!

This paper has outlined the concept of studenthood as a way of understanding the ways in which student identities are related to participation and retention. It argues that retention can be influenced by the different ways in which participating in learning is implicated in people's sense of who they are. Of course, their sense of a learning self can also be a damaged one, as in the case of people who see themselves as permanently blocked, or as someone who is a "drop out". Arguably, the identity of the lifelong student is also a damaged and damaging one, indicating trouble in moving from a different kind of "stuck place". These suggestions draw on Turner's ideas of liminality in an attempt to explain studenthood as an inherently transitory identity – one that people develop over time, but subsequently leave behind, and know from the outset that they will leave behind. For most learners, indeed, the whole purpose of studenthood is its transitory nature. As one interviewee put it: "My turn: I'm going forward now".

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