



With a little help from my friends: The value of social capital in higher education

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I think it's been *hard*; but I think it's been harder because I've been isolated. When you don't have a buddy that you can talk to...For the whole, effectively it's my third year, when you have nobody to talk to, when you've got nobody to discuss, 'Oh, I've come up with this idea; what do you think?' When you've got *absolutely* nobody, that's *damn* hard; really hard.

Amy: 39 y.o. mother of 2; Access entry qualification; 22 yr study gap; previously a retail then NHS clerk [2nd Interview]

This year I worked very closely with others to get me and them through as painlessly as possible [...] I learn most effectively with others, through discussion, debate and from their experiences. I find that my best way for something to sink in is to read about the subject, research it (a little bit) then debate it with others and swap info then research it further.

George: 33 y.o. mother of 2; Human Biology A-Level; 11 yr study gap; previously a human resources officer then held various un/semi-skilled roles [Reflective Diary]

- Early weeks of HE challenging while settling in and learning what's expected (Yorke 2005)
- Influenced by skills, experiences & expectations; familiarity with level of personal responsibility (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Sambell & Hubbard, 2004; Walker et al 2004)
- Intersection of institutional culture of HE and students' dispositions and backgrounds (see for example, Archer et al 2003; David et al 2010; Reay et al 2005)



How do occupational therapy students from non-traditional academic backgrounds negotiate the learning requirements of the higher education environment?

- Exploratory, instrumental case study approach (Stake 1995)
- Students with non-traditional academic backgrounds without prior experience of HE
- Incorporating Progression Routes Study and Documentary Analysis
- **3 year longitudinal Student Experiences Study**
 - 13 participants from a single cohort
 - Focus groups at entry
 - Individual reflective diaries
 - Semi-structured interviews towards the end of 1st & 3rd years of study

Habitus:

- Durable, transposable dispositions through which individuals perceive, judge & behave within, & think about the world; structured by the social forces of the field that produce it (Bourdieu 1990; Wacquant 1998).

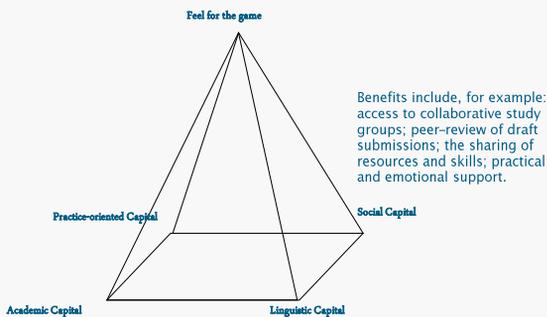
Field:

- Bounded social spaces, spheres or arenas of life which form distinct social worlds encompassing the 'rules of the game' and taken-for-granted practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

Capital:

- Any resource holding symbolic value within a given field & therefore acting as a currency of that field (primarily economic, cultural & social capital); individual portfolios influence position & trajectory within a given field (Wacquant, 1998).

Students' Experiences:



Although it can be stressful working with other people, it can also be really useful because you can get feedback from them, you can ask questions, you're not on your own and if there is an area you're unsure of, somebody else might have input. It's not about taking it all on your own shoulders

Lizzie: 46 y.o. mother of 5; Access entry qualification; 26 yr study gap; previously a school cook [1st Interview]

I think in the past I used to spend an absolute *decade* going around in circles. And if I'm really stuck, I'm not sure, it could go this way, it could go that way...Umm, you know, it's fifty-fifty sort of thing, then by just going and talking to people, you've cleared it up in sort of five-ten minutes and off you go again. Whereas if you haven't spoken to anybody, you know, you've got a tangent either way you look at it, it's a bit of a dilemma.

Amanda: 30.y.o; Access; 8 year study gap; ex-hairdresser [2nd Interview]

It's just clicked. Everything's happening now. I'm getting *really* good marks. I'm *really* pleased, touch wood, so far with what I've done. It all stems from [...] when I was doing the write up of the final report with one of the [other] students. We spent a lot of time in front of the computer together, writing it, making it read correctly. And the way she approached her academic writing was...*totally* different to mine, but very more advanced than mine. And just the way she structured her sentences, the way she looked at paragraphs to make them make sense...I just learnt so much from her, which I've then carried over into the essays and assignments that I've done since. And that has reflected in my marks; my marks have gone up...*massively* from year two.

Jemma: 25 y.o. ex- accounts analyst; Biology A-Level [2nd Interview]

on placement, I tend to do it with medical terms, which I think everybody does; you know, you're finding out about different things that were mentioned, but in university, it just can be *a* word. One of the girls, she's great for telling me words. We'll sit and have a chat and I'll go, "Whatever are you talking about?" [laughs] She's great at explaining and just giving me a definition of words..."OK; and how would you use that in a sentence?" [laughs]

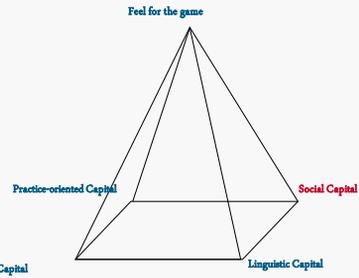
Betty: 34 y.o. mother of 1; Access entry qualification; 9 yr study gap; ex- beauty therapist and call centre manager [2nd Interview]

I think it's really important to have that support network for information, for keeping up to date with what's happening in the big, wide world out there, because changes happen all the time. And it's quite useful to know where people are at, if you like [...] it's going to be important for me to know how the situations are progressing there, what stage they are at, so when I go for interviews, I'll have a better understanding of what the situation is.

Gabby: 51 y.o.; Access entry qualification; 31 yr study gap; ex-courier then OT Assistant [2nd Interview]

I have endless discussions with friends, just trying to work out what some of them mean. Particularly for the last [...] Unit, no-one really knew what they were supposed to write, even though we had the sample essays, you couldn't figure out how it related to the marking criteria. And we were all a bit stuck and no-one knew whether they were going to pass or fail or...

Katrina: 18 y.o. living at home with parents, entered straight from college with an AVCE in Health and Social care [2nd Interview]



e.g. depth of disciplinary & related knowledge; skills in searching for, accessing & critically appraising, integrating & synthesising knowledge sources; ability to justify & substantiate ideas; accurate use of appropriate referencing/citation conventions; style, structure & tone of academic writing

central to interpretation of learning outcomes, marking criteria & feedback; critical to capacity to present knowledge & understanding in legitimated form and to ability to think using language & therefore manipulate, interrogate and develop concepts & ideas

I think I'd say get some friends [laughs] Get some close friends that are supportive; try and find some really supportive friends and work hard together, because it just makes life so much easier to share the workload.

Lynne: 21 y.o. NVCE entry qualification, ex-call-centre operative [2nd Interview]