Supercomplexity: Acknowledging Students' Lives in the 21st Century University

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Abstract
We live, work and study in a supercomplex world. This paper explores whether supercomplexity could be a term that helps us acknowledge this and thus help us reframe how we talk about education, in particular widening participation education. We use theoretical works on supercomplexity and third space, a critical angle on current policy and politics, as well as our own experience, to launch this exploration and to map the educational landscape our "non-traditional" students travel through - where for our students: *hic sunt dracones* ('here are dragons').

Key words: supercomplexity, non-traditional students, widening participation, third space, higher education

Introduction
We work in the United Kingdom (UK) in a post-1992, widening participation university set in an inner city context that recruits mainly "non-traditional" students. The typical, politically correct way to discuss our students is that they are "diverse". However a sub-text of many conversations about students such as ours is that they are "deficit" or deficient, lacking the skills or attributes required to succeed in university without some form of remediation. We want to challenge those conversations - and those words - in this piece. This paper therefore reflects on supercomplexity as a notion with which to talk about 21st century students to enable a more inclusive education for all learners. The reflections build on our own teaching experiences as well as theoretical works by authors on supercomplexity (Barnett 2000a, 2000b; Barnett & Hallam, 1999) and third space (Bhabha, 2004; Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2008). We move on to argue that 21st century educators need to create and utilise third space opportunities to counter current educational narratives so as to create a truly inclusive Higher Education (HE) and to acknowledge and foster the strengths that non-traditional students already possess to navigate a supercomplex world.

Starting Questions
Defining a student body as "diverse" or "non-traditional" does not fully capture the extent of the supercomplexity of students' lives in the 21st century. As educators and Learning Developers, we are searching for terminology for, or a means of adequately talking and writing about, today's students. We have considered *post-Web 2.0* or *Fourth Industrial Revolution* as terms as they implicitly recognise that today's students are online, with extensive networks, and are part of the

participatory digital movement in which educators and students have moved beyond a one-to-many pedagogic model to many-to-many education that necessitates students connecting not just consuming (Stewart & Lynds, 2019). However, we feel that our students are more than actors and participants in a digital world; thus these terms fall short. We also briefly considered the term *intersectionality,* but it can conjure up a world of increasing fragmentation where the language of identity can become weaponised not least through institutional practices: identity defined by economic outputs; skills audits; and rankings on the social mobility matrix. Hence we feel it is also not the right term to talk about our students. Similarly, *multicultural* does not seem to fully capture what we see in our classrooms and what we experience with our students. Although we have learners who come from different cultural backgrounds, most of our students have more complex lives than students had in the past. They are defined and shaped by a multitude of experiences that go far beyond binary explanations of the self to ones that span the globe and extend into the digital realm. Also, talking about *working-class* students seems no longer sufficient. Although those students often come from "non-advantaged" backgrounds, they, and their parents, are more prone to the "gig economy" and minimum wages than traditional manual labour jobs. In addition, the term *working-class* itself is becoming increasingly hard to define in our complex world where "traditional" markers of class status can no longer be applied (Atherton, Neal, Kaura, Jeavans & Applied Works, 2013). It seems therefore timely to strive to develop a language that helps us to describe today's student body. We need "words" to talk about students' lived experiences and their particular consciousnesses: their histories (social, cultural and digital), identities (gender, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, online and philosophical), familial contexts and commitments. We are therefore wondering: *Could supercomplexity be a term that helps us to talk about, and with, today's students? Should it therefore be a term that is refreshed to use in HE learning and teaching? And if so, how can that help us develop a humane university for widening participation students?*

The Supercomplex Highway

> Higher education is faced with not just preparing students for a complex world but is faced with preparing them for a *supercomplex* world. … It is a world in which we are conceptually challenged, and continually so (Barnett, 2000b, p. 257).

Supercomplexity as a term is often used in Business and Computing. Where it comes up in the Humanities and Social Sciences it is mainly about a humane curriculum (see Humboldtian Education Ideal). In education, and HE in particular, the term is sparsely used. Authors that have engaged with the notion are Barnett and Hallam (1999) who have argued for a pedagogy that is operative not only in the domains of knowledge and action, but also of the self. Barnett (2000a; 2000b) asserts that the main pedagogical task of a university is not to transmit knowledge but to develop students' attributes appropriate to the conditions of supercomplexity. In a later paper Barnett (2004, p. 260) calls for a pedagogy that prepares learners for an 'unknown future'; a pedagogy that fosters and supports human qualities that help

students in 'standing up to the world and engaging with it purposefully'. 'What is called for, therefore, is a creative knowing *in situ*' (Barnett, 2004, p. 251).

Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2012) talk about 'best practice' being linear, predictable and controllable i.e. a pedagogy defined by "what works". Although this is achievable, the question is: For whom does best practice work? And to what ends? Thus our proposition: we need to problematise the way that we discuss our students to help us rethink learning and teaching itself. Most current discussions about non-traditional or widening participation students centre around the idea of this cohort as 'other' (Mountz, 2009). The implication is that these students are seen as a typically problematic, essentially homogeneous group with similar issues and deficiencies. And yet when we "map" these students we see a mix of young and old, we see many different nationalities and cultures, we see a spectrum of self-confidence and doubt, and we see those excited to be in our classrooms and those who would rather be elsewhere. We argue that these students, although all non-traditional, are *truly* diverse and valuable in their supercomplexity. Thus, we need a bigger ontological turn not only in terms of pedagogy but also of the discourse about these learners. We need a terminology that is supportive and allows us to *see* our students and students to hold on to their subjectivity while also acknowledging the supercomplex reality we all live in.

Supercomplexity seems to enable this sort of discourse as it acknowledges increasingly multiplied and contrasting frames of reference. According to Barnett (2000a, 2000b), a situation is complex when we have to choose between a range of options, all within a well-defined frame of reference. Once decisions need to be made that require us to go beyond the usual (or original) frame of reference, that go beyond a single department or institution, that engage information technology, that are diverse and operating in a global context - the situation becomes supercomplex. It is a situation of uncertainty and unpredictability, one where the frames of reference are constantly shifting. This means, when talking about students, we can no longer refer to them as a single, unified group nor can we classify them or group them into different categories. We need to acknowledge that there is an element of uncertainty and fragility and thus strangeness (Barnett, 2004). This demands imagination, creativity, openness and ingenuity on the part of staff on the ground, and of institutional approaches and practices. We need processes that facilitate the student's ability to hold on to their subjectivity rather than abandoning it for objectivity. In other words, approaches and practices that enable students to see the university being comprised of many overlapping subjects where knowledge is constructed through humanity that is in search of knowing using reason.

The Context of Today's Learners

> As the humanities and liberal arts are downsized, privatized, and commodified, higher education finds itself caught in the paradox of claiming to invest in the future of young people while offering them few intellectual, civic and moral supports (Giroux, 2011).

In UK HE, and HE elsewhere, there is much talk about the lack of aspiration and subsequent lack of mobility within or between social strata, that affects certain groups. Rather than acknowledge wider systemic injustices and socio-economic circumstances that frustrate the progress of certain students and student groups, the failure to achieve is located in individuals (Reay, 2018). Particularly blamed for "failing to aspire" in the UK are those from a "working-class" background. A lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) is framed as an individual failure to have ambition and to achieve. And the words 'inclusion' and 'fifty per cent participation in HE' (Blair, 2001) that were supposed to midwife a change in the form and content of UK HE have instead become the 'mind-forg'd manacles' (Blake, 1789/1794) of our age, constraining the way education, universities and our students are seen, and how our students are responded to and treated. This is particularly pertinent considering current discussions revolving around skills, employability and success/achievement.

The stratification of the UK education system is widely acknowledged by intergovernmental organisations including The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as unjust and socially divisive: 'According to the OECD, British schools are some of the most socially segregated in the developing world' (Bloodworth, 2016, p. 81). The UK education system is riddled with inequalities justified on the back of a misguided belief in the notion of meritocracy where the best rise to the top; an idea promulgated by UK governments of all shades. The 'myth of meritocracy' (Bloodworth, 2016) justifies differential educational outcomes and perpetuates the inequalities in society as 'neoliberalism' (Bosanquet, 2019). Education operates as a system that from the top down favours already privileged groups, and where schools, teachers and parents gamify this process on a micro level (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). League tables like the National Student Survey (NSS), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) play into this situation. These "tables" not only function as ranking tools, but cultivate and sustain an assessment and management culture, which ensures that only those that conform to middle-class notions of "the best" are recognised and rewarded. Students either 'fit in' or 'stand out' (Reay, Croizier & Clayton, 2009).

For UK post-1992 universities this has real consequences. These universities are often deemed not worth their money. 'Value for money' being defined by the TEF (Times Higher Education, 2019) as the progression of graduates into high-paying jobs, something more likely to happen for middle- and upper-class students, those students that are already privileged and have the social and cultural capital to navigate HE and job markets. Some therefore argue that these universities should not be called universities (see Adams, 2017). Others again attribute these "new" universities a focus on vocational and applied subjects of lower status (see Scott, 1992). Viewed through these reductive lenses, students in post-1992 universities are said to attend 'Mickey Mouse courses' (Harding, 2019); courses that do not lead to well-paid jobs and satisfactory careers.

Some even argue that these students should not go to university at all because completing a university degree makes them 'overeducated'; 'They possess more

education than required for the job' (Office for National Statistics cited in BBC News, April 2019). Similarly, staff working in these institutions are seen as less academic than that in "elite" universities and thus are subjected to (casual) contracts that demand high contact hours and offer little time for research. Academic positions in post-1992 universities like ours are therefore often described as 'staging posts' until a position in a higher ranked university can be obtained (Grant & Sherrington, 2006). Meanwhile there is no evidence that staff in these institutions deliver lower quality work; on the contrary, teaching in post-1992 universities is often of excellent quality (Leathwood, 2004).

Imagining Education Differently

There have been numerous attempts to counter this sort of rhetoric and arguments (Burns and Sinfield, 2004). For example, Burn and Finnigan (2003) counter the very framing of students in post-1992 universities as deficit, arguing that these students are not disadvantaged but rather they are 'not advantaged'; they have not been groomed from birth to survive and thrive in a middle-class academia. Burn together with colleagues (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015; Pratt-Adams, Maguire & Burn, 2010) further rejects the term 'social mobility' in favour of a more nuanced discussion of social class and urban life. Lillis (2001) specifically criticises HE for not adopting a broader framework of reference to the contexts and experiences of these "non-traditional" students. She argues that the view of these students, and the institutions they attend, is a negative response to working-class people and widening participation in education. It is a "classist" response where these students, the least powerful of all stakeholders, are accused of "dumbing down" HE, of polluting its ivory towers and taking the jewels out of its crown. She argues that what is needed instead is a critical analysis of HE's own practices, the practices which in and of themselves help to maintain the negative talk about these students and institutions:

> Student language is made visible and problematised but the language of discourse and the pedagogical practices in which they are embedded … remain invisible, taken as 'given' (Lillis, 2001, p. 22).

Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) have argued for a broader approach to learning and teaching, one that focuses on academic literacies rather than "study skills" and thus locates the issues not in individual students but in HE and its approach to learning and teaching:

> Viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach (rather than in terms of educational judgements about good and bad writing) and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular and academic learning in general (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158).

Piccione (2015) goes even a step further in his discussion of 'didactics'. In his analysis, he takes a global perspective, moving beyond and critiquing previous educational theory and literature which he believes is predominantly Anglo-centric and Western European in nature. He argues that technological advances change our very "being", our family relationships, communities and wider societies at an ever increasing rate. Traditional institutions, academic disciplines and individual practices

and praxes fail to recognise, or take advantage of, the opportunities that innovative technological advances afford:

> What I mean is: educational professions and roles cannot ignore the impact produced by social phenomena and by the pure presence of tools that have been modifying our lifestyles and learning styles (Piccione, 2015, p. 9).

Whilst institutional responses are to introduce more policies and checklists, what we actually need is to re-frame the very way we view and inhabit our world and the way that world is approached and represented through our educational praxes and language.

The Alienated Academic: From Helpless to Hopeful

Ironically, efforts to make education more ineffable, more emergent and more nuanced (i.e. more "messy") happen at the very moment when education is coerced into becoming ever more strategic, marketised and market-focused with its language becoming ever more simplistic and reductive. Hall has written recently on *The Alienated Academic* (Hall, 2018) and is now writing about *The Hopeless University* (Hall, 2019), focussing on:

> hopelessness and helplessness inside the University; University as an anxiety machine; …; the University predicated upon alienated academic labour-power; and, the University as an abject space, unable to engage meaningfully with crises of social reproduction. It asks whether it is possible to refuse the University as is, as a trans-historical space that can only exist for capital.

In this alienating and hopeless context, having and using the "right" language that sufficiently describes our students and the worlds they inhabit and represent, and that cannot be easily appropriated and manipulated to negative effect, appears key. We need this (new) language in order to develop an inclusive HE in which all of today's students can be welcomed and enabled to successfully participate; harnessing the sorts of power/consciousnesses they possess to make learning happen as they inculcate their input into evolving epistemic and disciplinary communities. We need to talk about students more adequately and fairly, especially when trying to develop curricula that capture their interests, foster their existing knowledge and skills, and prepare them for an uncertain and unknown future while acknowledging who they are and who they want to become. There is a sort of double-hermeneutic (Giddens, 1982; 1987) that we need to engage with beyond interpolation. It is an interpretation and understanding of the very own subject we are trying to engage with and support: the students themselves.

We all need to become translators of some sort to navigate the supercomplex and often contested meanings presented to us. Taking this into account, what is important in HE is therefore not the (traditional) transmission of knowledge, but the enabling of *all* students to navigate supercomplexity: to engage in those relationships and to understand and map those processes that are the essential nature of knowledge-construction. This would also enable the apprehension of the

appropriation of knowledge and the knowledge industry by dominant discourses (Foucault, 1969) so that students can make their own accommodation with the discourses of inclusion and exclusion. Needed are empowering approaches and curricular design models that promote the development of critically engaged students. All students need to be recognised as (active) actors and agents in their own learning i.e. individuals who are capable of operating with awareness within their epistemic communities and the world.

What can we do in our Classrooms?

Piccione (2015) asks an important question for all HE practitioners: How do we map this swiftly evolving landscape to better prepare our teaching for the world that our students inhabit now and in the future? He warns us that as the academy is blinkered towards the characteristics of the "new" (and thus unknown) student (inevitably locating problems and issues only there) it neglects the complex, nuanced or emergent ways in which we are all continually 'becoming' (Kolb & Kolb 2008a; 2008b) in our lived world. Especially now that that becoming is gaining greater complexity throughout life, educators cannot continue with outdated disciplinary and faculty practices and languages that form silos of knowledge into which students need to be inculcated. Not only is this essentially disrespectful, it becomes preparation for worlds and professional practices that no longer exist.

Piccione (2015) stresses that the knowledge gathering, analytical and critical stances so praised by HE are already possessed by student citizens of the 21st century, although not necessarily consciously. It is the harnessing of these "modern" attributes that current HE policy and institutional drivers neglect and even negate (Burns, Sinfield and Holley, 2009) particularly when they, in the most part, demonise our students. Especially in their narratives around the deficit non-traditional student focusing on their lack of social, cultural and academic capital and suggesting that these students are in need of "fixing". '... [S]tudents are referred to in terms of what they are not: *not* traditional, *not* prepared for higher education, *not* in a position of privilege or advantage' (Smit, 2012, p. 370). The discourse is further weaponised through policy and politics in support of the already privileged.

Vai and Sosulski (2011) indicate that when designing our curricula (and courses), we do need to think more positively and more actively about students. Knowledge cannot be considered a deliverable and transmissible product and educational roles cannot be considered as technical. This does not depend on pedagogical reasons; this depends on a different reason: the human need for perceiving the future as a promise and not as a threat:

> Agents inherit a position within the social structure that conditions their perceptions, values and beliefs of the situation. However, their freedom to act is also either constrained or facilitated by the current structure. Hence, social interaction is conditioned by structure but cannot be determined by structure because contemporary agents possess their own emergent properties (Archer, cited in Jennings, 2015, pp. 79-80).

What we see is the oscillation between the latent potential of students *per se* and the threat of the non-traditional student to the expectations of HE. This is not to get caught in another binary turn. We do not see the student as an object to be worked on. We do not believe in the valorisation of knowledge claims and discourses hidden inside disciplines, and protected by physical or discursive gate keepers. Instead, we see the university as a place for everyone to succeed.

This returns us to the role of the university and its congruence or incongruence with student goals and desires. Whilst universities themselves shout for and of their academic credibility, one traditional role of the university was (and still is) "finishing school" for the children of the middle-classes predicated on independent rather than inter-dependent learning and behaviour (Chang, 2018). The end products of this "elite" education are deemed "civilised" and culturally coherent individuals; people fit for the managerial or bureaucratic roles they are destined for. It is with this "hidden curriculum" that 'the [university] text says what it does not say' (Macherey, 1990, p.215; see also Giroux & Purpel, 1983). Because of this, the working-class student in a middle-class institution experiences something fundamentally different and potentially more pernicious than the middle-class one.

In a post-1992 university where students are typically over-21 and with life experiences and a history upon which to draw (London Metropolitan University, 2018), students often attend for reasons such as: perhaps to find their voices, perhaps to redirect their lives, or perhaps to bring the knowledge and skills they hope to develop back to their communities to enrich them. And whilst these students are seeking some form of transformation, how much and how far they should change to 'fit in' within HE is problematic for them and society. It might be that the response to non-traditional students is rooted in "epistemological conflict", as evidenced by the audit refrain of study skills, digital skills, employability skills, knowledge skills and soft skills. However, these problematic issues of transformation and identity show that at heart the conflict is ontological. It is an ontological conflict masquerading as an epistemological one, or a skills one, or an employability one; one that is embodied and lived, not one that can be explained by economics or checklists.

Case Study Examples
In widening participation initiatives across the country there have been some concrete and practical efforts to act differently, with less sublimated hostility to non-traditional students. There are well-established supplementary instruction initiatives and student support programmes, for example, peer mentoring and success coach schemes where students from the second and third year support their peers settling into the university as well as outreach programmes that promote achievement and progression into HE more generally. However, well-meaning as these are, these represent a model offering only local, even individual, fixes that may "remediate" or help individual students, but do not address the supercomplexity of either education or the students themselves. For students rightly understood to exist in a supercomplex environment, we must develop approaches much more human and

oscillating. Thus we will discuss our experiences of developing undergraduate and postgraduate (staff development) courses that can be seen as first attempts to reframe practice for supercomplex students in a supercomplex environment.

The Sir John Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University (*The Cass*) offers courses that take into account different ways of knowing and doing. For example, The BA Hons Fine Art allows for students to explore ideas and make work based on ludic exploration and embodied forms of knowledge. Often these embodied forms of knowledge are ineffable but students still attempt to bring it to bear in their courses and personal work. They engage with issues and topics creatively. Similarly in the BA Hons Education Studies we, the authors of this paper, have reframed a so-called academic skills module and turned it into a welcoming but essentially disruptive module designed to 'de-school' (Illich, 1970) and allow for playful and creative learning experiences that integrate and foster students' self-efficacy, belief and achievement beyond reading and writing (Sinfield, Burns & Abegglen, 2019).

In addition, we have reframed our work with academic staff. To prepare the supercomplex practitioner for a supercomplex role, the staff development offered by our Centre for Professional and Educational Development offers a PostGraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert) designed to provoke our participants into questioning fundamental concepts of teaching and learning. Particularly the first module, Facilitating Student Learning (FSL) seeks to liberate the participants from the shackles of traditional education practices and to destabilise taken for granted notions of what education is and could or should be; it seeks to challenge notions of the non-traditional or widening participation student. The tutors on this course work to help the academics-as-students to be truly inclusive i.e. to welcome their own students for the supercomplex people they are and the experiences they bring, and to value them as they undertake their quest to be the academics they wish to become. Students at London Metropolitan University typically arrive with rich lived lives, and rather than being "diagnosed" so that their whole academic career is designed only that their academic deficits can be "fixed" the ethos of praxes of our PGCert is that the supercomplexity of the undergraduate student experience and knowledge should be embraced. The PGCert teaches radical ways to challenge conceptions and preconceptions about students' learning, teaching, assessment. It tackles reading through 'textscrolling' (Abegglen, Burns, Middlebrook & Sinfield, 2019), and writing through 'free writing' (Elbow, 1973; Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2016) and 'dialogic encounter' (Bakhtin, 1981). Staff on the course are encouraged to reflect on their own learning via blogging (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2015) and to explore alternative ways to present their final assignment (Burns, Sinfield & Abegglen, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2018e) including video diary, visual essays and 3D sculpture. More importantly the course encourages practitioners to change by problematising and developing their approach to teaching, and to their students.

Third Space Opportunities: Teaching and Learning as Supercomplex Experiences

Widening participation, and students themselves, are often tackled in both atomised and mechanistic ways as if responding to complex but essentially traceable issues. Their supercomplexity, however, requires continual mapping of existing challenges in a way that also shows and makes transparent the contested nature of knowledge and knowledge construction, and addresses multi-disciplinarity with multi-contestability powered by student agency, efficacy and a creative criticality. Only this latter would start to build a real apprehension of the supercomplexity of the issues involved and thus to enhance trust across a university and allow for the development of frameworks or matrices, of questions and discourses so as to contest institutional rationales and academic disciplines. We need to, 'locate ourselves in our institutions, to find counter-stories, to inhabit universities in different ways, to open up the nooks and crannies, cracks and crevices. [To] each become a tiny university' (Bosanquet, 2018) i.e. to create "third spaces". Our recommendation is that we need third spaces and places to grapple with the supercomplexities of education and learning in 'an unequally globalized society driven by logics of media and capital' (Stewart, 2019; see also, Gutierrez, 2008). We need these third spaces to bring together the ontology and the ontological roots of our students with their desire for a meaningful academic and epistemological journey.

We could argue that education is a 'third space profession' (Whitchurch, 2008) able to harness 'in-between' opportunities (Gutiérrez, 2008; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2014). Soja's (1996) theorization of third space and Shields' (2004) analysis of Henri Lefebvre's work (2003; 1991) reveal the liberatory potential of the space that can be created and occupied by educationists and students. In this space the negative striations of normal academic power relations can be swept away because it is a space that is open to (re)definition (Wesch, Davidson & Bass, 2014). Here boundaries are fuzzy and malleable (Webster, 2018), goals can be redefined and existing hierarchies can be flattened and replaced by dialogic encounters (Bakhtin, 1981). It is a space that can be occupied by 'being with' each other (Nancy, 2000) enabling the creation of something more porous and much more welcoming: a space of opportunities.

In practice, this has involved us utilising creative and ludic (see for example Winnicott, 1971; Huizinga 1980/1949; James & Nerantzi, 2019) practice to foster third space opportunities within the curriculum akin to those created by Gutiérrez (2008) with the emphasis on redesigning what counts as teaching and learning (of literacy) and that honour both our academic staff and our non-traditional students. We posit that it is practices like this that enable negatively labelled students to find their own voices in the exclusionary, competitive, and hostile HE environment (Burns, Sinfield and Abegglen, 2019).

Conclusion: Welcoming People into the Future: Supercomplex World, Supercomplex Education

We occupy and swim in contested educational narratives and currents including debates about the massification of Higher Education, the rationales for academic courses and the introduction of fees. These debates construct government and institutional policies, validation and inspection regimes; i.e. they create our perceptions of education and of ourselves. Education is not neutral: it is socio-economic and political activity; it is ontological as well as epistemological work. As educationists we therefore need not only practices but also "words" that allow us to talk about students' lived experiences and their particular consciousnesses, and to help us take action. We need ways of supporting students that acknowledge their strengths and their particular ways of being and becoming.

As 'in-between professionals' (Whitchurch, 2008) educators are well placed to challenge current trends and perceptions and so positively support students. As in-betweeners they can also offer and create third space opportunities (Gutiérrez, 2008; Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991, 2003) for socio-political action alongside (Webster, 2018), but importantly within the curriculum to work in partnership with students (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2014) and with other staff to challenge and stretch the boundaries of HE. It is via this critical and collaborative practice that they can help students map and make sense of the education world and their learning (Van Niekerk, 2016).

Supercomplexity as outlined by Barnett (2000a, 2000b) is a term that allows us to not only to describe and embrace the supercomplexity of the world(s) students inhabit but also the supercomplexity of the lived lives of students, especially of our diverse, non-traditional students. However, powerful as they are, words are not enough. Despite countless arguments and efforts to conceptualise practice differently, it has never been more necessary to make HE truly inclusive (Bloodworth, 2016). Our non-traditional students are the ones who persistently experience educational rebuff, who are labelled as deficit and stereotyped as 'less than' (for example see Savic, Vecchi & Lewis, 2019; BBC News, April 2019). Whilst widening participation was welcomed for ostensibly creating more opportunities, in practice it could be said to have ushered in instead a two-tier HE system where some students' degrees are now considered less than the degrees issued to more traditional students at more traditional institutions (see Harding, 2019).

In our institution we attempt to create third space opportunities within our praxes that allow for a more nuanced engagement with tertiary education. And it is via those creative and ludic praxes that we map and challenge the dominant discourses and narratives of learning to allow us to *see* the supercomplex educational landscape that 21ˢᵗ century learners have to navigate. But, there is a need to further debunk the fashionable idea that HE needs to focus on "skills" and "employment" (Cole, 2018; Warren, 2002) and that academics need to "teach to the test" for best outcomes in surveys and league tables because this alienates academics and students from themselves and their work (Hall, 2018). We know that we must make positive accommodations for our non-traditional learners and their supercomplex

realities if we are to create a humane education within educational spaces where they are no longer "othered" or labelled as deficient, but valued for the rich lives and experiences with which they enter our institutions. Yet, it seems difficult for many institutions to fully acknowledge and value the supercomplex world these students live- and study in. There also appears to be little space for this sort of conversation within the broader educational narratives that dominate the political discourse and the popular imagination about what education, and tertiary education, is for, who it must serve and how its value should be measured.

Thus, we would argue that it is essential to think and talk about the supercomplexity of our students' lives positively and to give all students the sorts of third space opportunities that allow them to be who they already are and to become the academics they want to be. Given that the third space is the space of potentiality, of the liminal and the unmapped; given that it is the street fighting and nomadic space (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) of education, we need to foster these spaces in times of supercomplexity. But, we are left wondering: *If supercomplexity is a term that helps us to talk about, and with, today's students, how can that conversation be moved outside the boundaries of our own widening participation institutions such that it influences the way that the public, the politicians and policy-makers enable us to develop a humane university for all students and pave the way for a more humane society?*

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