We need to no we no nuthink”

Widening participation should be a top priority at all UK universities. But how many of us really understand its challenges, and how we can overcome them? This book seeks to provide clear, persuasive, constructive and often radical advice for Art and Design academics, but I believe it also has much to say to those from other disciplines – more on this later.

Bhagat & O’Neill take a wide view of what they term the ‘learning lifecycle: from pre-entry to entry, from further education to higher education, from undergraduate to postgraduate, from graduation to career and perhaps re-entry into higher education’ (p. 39). Referring to Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field, they tell us that widening participation:

...has increasingly been seen as primarily addressing socio-economic class and increasing lower socio-economic groups’ access to and success in Higher Education. While this is important, Bourdieu also offers a way to understand not only how class works as a barrier, but how socio-economic privilege works to thicken and complicate the barriers of age, disability, gender, race and sexuality. Thus, work to widen participation in Higher Education must address the totality of these barriers to offer real, structural change (p. 21, my italics).

The book argues that the nature of Higher Education needs to be changed radically in order to meet the needs of all students. Many academics might believe they are already meeting those needs. However, Bhagat & O’Neill contend that institutions (or individuals within them), can end up adopting exclusive practices without meaning to or even realising because of what they expect from applicants at interview, or the kind/s of written work they demand, or the learning environments they provide, or the support they offer to students in difficulties, or a variety of other reasons.

1 Page 212
If I have a criticism, it is that this book needs a conclusion. The first chapter focuses largely on the background to widening participation, and subsequent chapters take the reader through the learning lifecycle, with each containing a discussion by the editors followed by one or more papers authored by senior academics, researchers, and practising visual artists. However, there is no conclusion that pulls together the numerous strands and delivers a clear, holistic summary. That said, I did not read a chapter without realising, I can do more to widen participation than I’m doing now. Furthermore, I think several papers might interest readers from beyond Art and Design. Key examples include Chapter 5 'Spaces of Learning', in which Olivia Sagan discusses how students’ experiences of pre-university learning environments can hinder their undergraduate success; Chapter 8 'From Disability to Learning Differences', in which Jane Graves declares that dyslexia is ‘an alternative learning style’ (p. 221); and Chapter 7 'Academic Writing in Art and Design', in which John Wood challenges the role of rigour in design research. A fascinating read.