



Foreword to the special issue

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This piece is a Foreword to the Special Issue “Students on Screen”.



I was delighted to be asked to write a foreword to this special issue because it addresses a topic that has been central to my research over recent years – i.e. the ways in which students are constructed by a variety of different social actors – and also because it focuses on what is, outside of the US, still a relatively under-researched area: how on-screen representations of students contribute to our understanding of them and the institutions within which they study.

Exploring constructions of students is important because it can help advance broader debates within the study of education. For example, the research I have carried out about constructions of students within six European nations (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain) has raised questions about the supposed homogenisation of student experience and identity (as a result of globalisation and Europeanisation) by pointing to significant diversity in how students are conceptualised – both across and within nation-states (Brooks et al. 2022). In this way, it has also helped to critique understandings of nation-states as ‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth 2014). Constructions are also important, however, because of the significant material effects that they can have – not least on the lives of students. As Bacchi (2000) has argued, language does more than name things; it imposes limits on what can be said, and whose voices are viewed as legitimate. Indeed, in our European research, we have shown how Danish students we spoke to believed that the construction of them as ‘lazy’ in various policy and media texts made invisible the hard work they had put into their studies, the high levels of stress some were feeling, and the challenges, reported by many, of juggling paid work alongside their studies. Similarly, Spanish students believed that the impact of their political activity was minimised because of how the media focused on the type of action taken (particularly the violence sometimes used) rather than the reasons for the action, while students in England reported that the problems they experienced were sometimes trivialised because of assumptions that they must be alcohol-related – informed by stereotypical constructions of the ‘partying student’ (Brooks et al. 2022).

Examining constructions of students can also shed light on the extent to which ‘student’ constitutes a distinct social identity. For example, in the European project mentioned above, it was notable that a student identity seemed to have much less social resonance in Poland than in the other countries in the study (Brooks and Abrahams 2021). Indeed, we were unable to find any nationally-produced TV show or films that featured students prominently, and the number of newspaper articles that focused on students was very significantly lower than in the rest of the sample (Brooks et al. 2022). We have explained this national difference with respect to the unusually rapid expansion of higher education in Poland – such that many Polish people now

believe ‘anyone’ can attend university (Kwiek 2018), and the evidence that many Polish students see themselves more as workers than students (Eurostudent n.d.), because of the increasing importance of gaining work experience during higher education as a result of the increased competition for graduate jobs.

Poland is perhaps an unusual case, however. Emerging research would suggest that, in many parts of the world, students are seen as distinct social actors – evidenced by the ways in which they are foregrounded in TV shows, films and, as this special issue shows, social media and on-screen games, too. The media can play an important part in informing how students are understood. Hüther and Krücken (2014), for example, have argued that the mass media played a key role in mediating higher education policy in Germany, specifically with reference to the rise and fall of tuition fee policy, while Williams (2011) contends that, in England, journalists have represented students as consumers but also as infantilised, because of the elongation of the period of financial dependency brought about by higher fees. Those writing about the impact of popular culture, in particular, have argued that it can offer up constructions of students that are absent from mainstream debate. Indeed, Cousins (2005) has identified popular cultural representations of higher education as a space of play in which meanings and values are expressed, particularly around ‘race’ and class, that are absent from other public representations. Moreover, Fisher et al. (2008: 165) have argued that, although higher education is often portrayed in stereotypical terms – taking place in an elite environment in which entry is determined by class and wealth – representations of students do not always conform to stereotypes giving, as an example, an episode of *The Simpsons* in which students are not portrayed as rebellious, political, lazy or addicted to wild living but, instead, ‘well behaved, respectful and intent on studying hard’.

As part of our research on constructions of higher education students in Europe, Lainio (2023: 42) has contended that films and TV shows operate as a form of ‘public pedagogy’ – i.e. that they have the ‘ability to describe and reproduce meanings, values and identities that resonate with broader discourses and dominant ideologies’. On the basis of her analysis of eight films and TV shows, she argues, in line with some of the studies above, that screen representations of students can be both resistive and reproductive. She shows how the constructions of students reproduce traditional gender binaries of the male intellectual and the female caregiver; meritocratic discourses, which assume that individuals are primarily responsible for their own academic success or failure; and understandings of non-traditional students as ‘outsiders’ in elite institutions. However, examples of resistance are also evident – not least in the portrayal (in the series *Fresh Meat* – which is also discussed in this special issue) of a non-traditional student as, ultimately, academically successful. This, Lainio argues,

provides a significant contrast to the typical depiction of the 'ideal learner' as a white, middle-class male.

Despite the contributions made by Lainio and others who have explored on-screen representations of students over recent years (e.g. Calver and Michael-Fox 2021; Silverio et al. 2021), our knowledge in this area is still relatively limited – with studies typically concentrated in Anglophone countries of the Global North, and on TV shows and films. The wide geographical reach of this special issue, as well as its examination of different types of 'screen', are thus commendable. Together, the papers that make it up will help further our understanding of the reproductive and resistive potential of on-screen portrayals of students and their material impact.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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