



Creating an intentionally dialogic space: Student activism and the Newcastle Occupation 2010



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ABSTRACT

Dominant discourses tend to represent young people as politically apathetic, disengaged and inert. Yet, in late 2010, tens of thousands of young people across the UK protested against government proposals to change the ways in which higher education is funded. In numerous universities across the country, students occupied buildings, facilitated protests and challenged university leaders to speak out against the proposed changes. At Newcastle University, a group of highly organised students occupied the Fine Art lecture theatre for seventeen days in late 2010 in resistance to these changes. In this paper, we draw upon a detailed analysis of twenty-seven interviews with young people who participated in the Newcastle Occupation, supplemented by participant observation of Occupation meetings. We argue that the students created an intentionally dialogic space in the Occupation in a number of ways, including how they organised it, how they used social media and the internet, the actions they participated in and the ways in which they engaged with the elite. These insights offer an important contribution to debates and young people and politics and exemplify the ways in which the student activists involved in the Newcastle Occupation were sophisticated political agents who strategically and tactfully engaged with politics matters.

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Introduction: young people, politics and political geography

Just over ten years ago, Philo and Smith (2003: 103) noted that 'the sub-discipline of political geography has never shown any special interest in children and young people' and contended that this was not surprising, given that young people below voting age do not have much influence on different 'political' structures. A useful point of differentiation made by Philo and Smith (2003) was to make a distinction between Politics (with a capital 'P') and politics (with a small 'p') to clarify the difference between formal macropolitics and the micropolitics of everyday life. Arguably, the field has made much progress in the last ten years or so (Hopkins, 2010; Hopkins & Alexander, 2010; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Philo & Smith, 2013; Skelton, 2013). The place of young people in political geography has been the focus of research articles on topics as diverse as: young people's engagements with immigration systems and debates (Cahill, 2010; Crawley, 2010); ethnicised and

minoritised young people's post-9/11 political engagement (Hopkins, 2004; Hopkins, 2007; Hörschelmann, 2008a); young people's performance of citizenship (Staehele, Attoh, & Mitchell, 2013); everyday emotional geopolitics of youth (Pain, Panelli, Kindon, & Little, 2010); and the political worlds of children (e.g. Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Mitchell & Elwood, 2013). A significant set of contributions within this area has been advanced by Hörschelmann (2008a; El Rafaie and Hörschelmann, 2010; Hörschelmann & El Rafaie, 2013; Hörschelmann & Schafer, 2005). Hörschelmann convincingly argues that we need to broaden our view of political agency to consider young people's place in the 'making, renegotiation and contestation of global politics' (2008a: 587) and to appreciate the 'embodied, material engagements' (p. 599) of young people with political issues.

Neighbouring (sub)disciplines to political geographies of youth – such as political science, sociology of youth citizenship and childhood studies – have all experienced a similarly recent growth of interest in the relationships between children, youth and politics. Research in political science has started to develop a critical mass focused on young people's politics (e.g. Sloam, 2010, 2012), with the Political Studies Association in the UK setting up a specialist group, Young People's Politics, in 2013 (<http://www.psa.ac.uk/psa-communities/specialist-groups/young-peoples-politics>). Political

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science research has focused on explaining patterns of youth voting (Fahmy, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Phelps, 2004) and attitudes towards political parties (Henn, Weinstein, & Forrest, 2005; Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002). Closely related to this, research about youth citizenship has explored young people's conceptualisations of citizenship and transition (Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003; Thomson et al., 2004). Childhood studies scholarship has included, for example, reflections on the political engagements of children in everyday life (Moss, 2013) and representations of youth protests against the Iraq war (Such, Walker, & Walker, 2004).

In terms of young people's engagements with formal politics, commonsense discourse tends to represent them as apathetic, disengaged and inert (Henn et al., 2002). This is perhaps not surprising, given that only 39% of eligible 18–24-year-olds in the UK voted in 2001, with 37% voting in 2005 and 44% in 2010 (compared with overall figures of 59%, 61% and 65% respectively for the population as a whole). This is similar to trends across Europe, where elections in the 2000s saw 59% of 18–24-year-olds turn out to vote, compared to 82% for the population as a whole (Sloam, 2013). Young people also have lower levels of membership of political parties and are less likely to show any affiliations or connections with such organisations than their older contemporaries (Henn & Foard, 2012; Sloam, 2013). This has led to explorations of the reasons behind lower levels of voting amongst younger people (Kimberlee, 2002) and recommendations for how politics may be made more engaging for younger people (White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000). Some would lay the blame directly on young people for their apparent disengagement and lower levels of political knowledge compared to their parents' generation (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004), with some studies even arguing that 'because young people conceptualise politics in a limited and narrow way they perceive the subject as boring and irrelevant to their lives at present' (White et al., 2000: vi). This view can be critiqued similarly to the criticism made of critical geopolitics for its focus on elite discourse rather than on how political issues are experienced, negotiated and lived out in everyday life (e.g. Hörschelmann, 2008b).

Recent studies, however, have provided a range of alternative responses to simply labelling young people as disengaged and apathetic as a result of their lower levels of engagement with formal politics. Although young people may be less likely to vote than their parents' or grandparents' generations, this does not necessarily mean that young people are disengaged or have no interest in politics. Indeed, O'Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, and McDonagh (2003) and O'Toole, Marsh, and Jones (2003) have provided a powerful critique of the literature on young people and politics for adopting too narrow a definition of the political (see also Marsh, O'Toole, & Jones, 2007, Marsh et al., 2007). There is much evidence to show that young people do engage in a variety of different forms of political activity, whether this is through volunteering, campaigning, demonstration or through awareness-raising, boycott or direct action (e.g. Hörschelmann, 2008a; Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1999). The issue is the imposition on young people of a narrow definition of politics and a top-down perception about what citizenship and democracy are about. Furthermore, Marsh et al. (2007) query the simplistic association between non-participation and apathy, as young people – indeed any person – may have a very well thought-through, detailed and political reason for not voting or not engaging with a specific political issue, therefore non-participation does not equate to apathy. Henn and Foard (2012: 52) note that their research revealed that, 'far from being apolitical and apathetic, young people are interested in political matters, and are more so than were their predecessors in 2002'. Two key issues are: first, young people are interested and

engaged in Politics (despite not voting as regularly as the generations before them); and second, adopting a broader definition of 'politics' (to include micro and macro political issues) makes it clear that young people's everyday lives are inherently political in a whole range of complex ways.

We contend that work about children, youth and politics tends to focus either on young people's (weak) relationship with formal politics (e.g. voting, political party membership, etc) or on the multiple and complex ways that political issues are part and parcel of children's and young people's everyday lives. Arguably, the former is concerned with defining what constitutes politics (and then places young people's engagement onto this definition), whilst the latter is focused on conceptualising and mapping out young people's politics. Whilst speaking to both sets of debates, we locate this paper in an alternative set of literature that shows attentiveness to young people's political engagements and activism in spaces that are arguably neither formal political spaces nor 'everyday' political spaces. In particular, this paper is situated in emerging literature about student resistance and protest in response to government cuts to the funding of higher education in England (Burton et al., 2013; Hancox, 2011; Hopkins, Todd, & Newcastle Occupation, 2012; Radice, 2013; Rheinghans and Hollands, 2013; Solomon & Palmieri, 2011; Theocharis, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) as well as broader debates about student activism (Crossley, 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012) and geographies of protest and social movements (Gillan, Pickerill, & Webster, 2011; Nicholls, 2007; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). In order to make an important contribution to research in this area, we focus on a detailed analysis of interviews with students who participated in an Occupation of the Fine Art Lecture Theatre in Newcastle University for 17 days in late 2010. We chart the political engagements of these students and use the idea of 'intentional dialogism' to help explore the practices and processes that the students engaged with in order to create an 'intentionally dialogic space'. To do this we investigate how the students organised the Occupation, used social media, engaged with elite figures and participated in non-violent direct action as part of their intentionally dialogic political engagements as members of the Newcastle Occupation. Before exploring the empirical material, we provide the context of rising tuition fees and student Occupations in England, followed by a brief outline of intentional dialogism and our methodological approach.

Rising tuition fees and student Occupations: the study

Motivated by its perceived need to make a series of 'austerity cuts', in late 2010 the Coalition government of the UK was successful in securing agreement to increase university tuition fees to a maximum of £9000 per year (previously increased in 2004 to £3000). Alongside this, cuts were proposed to a range of welfare entitlements in England, notably educational maintenance allowance (EMA), which was a means-tested payment made to young people who continued in post-compulsory schooling beyond the minimum school leaving age. These proposals resulted in protests, marches, campaigns and Occupations across the country:

The student Occupations of university buildings signalled the beginning of an ongoing campaign against increased tuition fees in November 2010 and mobilised students to participate in a series of large, and occasionally violent, demonstrations in late 2010. The Occupations were part of the 'Anti-cuts' movement.... (Theocharis, 2012: 164)

Towards the end of November, following a National Day of Action to defend education, groups of university students joined teachers, social workers and lecturers in cities across England and marched in

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