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I'd like to thank you for inviting us to this event and in particular, I'd like to thank Georgio Zoia for his hard work and his patience. I'd also like to thank the translators and apologise in advance for Anthony's and my own, often indecipherable British Working Class accents.

The project I run, Goldsmiths Open Book, is a part of the Widening Participation Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Open Book also works as a part of the south east London Aspire Aimhigher Partnership and is linked to four other universities and all of the FE Colleges in south east London. It is a pro-active initiative designed to recruit prospective students that have a history of educational and social exclusion. People with a history of prison, addiction, homelessness, mental health and other such issues are given the opportunity to discover the educational options that they never believed are available to them.

Open Book offers advice, encouragement and support to all the people it comes into contact with and does not discriminate on any level, believing education is a right that should be inclusive and available to all. Open Book's pro-active approach means it is always looking for new initiatives to increase the number of students it can assist through the means of education and its accessibility. In the four years since the initiative came into being it has successfully recruited and supported over one hundred students on various courses from foundation level to post-graduate in a

number of educational institutions. All of those people are individuals who, before their contact with the project, had never considered an academic pathway. All come from the most marginalised backgrounds and had been failed by the education system. The project works with pupil referral units and the local youth and community services. Open Book is a project dealing with the currently educationally excluded young and the later products of that exclusion, run by other products of that system that have turned their lives around through reintroduction to education.

My main memory of when I was first arrested at the age of fifteen, is of being spoken to by a social worker and of the social worker being both overly sympathetic and at the same time aloof, being understanding but not being able to understand. I was told why I had behaved in the way that I had and, apparently, was not responsible for that behaviour; it appeared that this well-meaning person knew more about me than I did about myself and we'd only just met. She smiled knowingly and kindly in all the right places and had all the answers. Though the social worker did all she could to make me feel that I was an equal, it was obvious from the power dynamics of the conversation that I was not truly considered as such. It was also clear to me that she didn't recognise this. Nonetheless, I was aware too, that if needed I could have her 'eating out of my hand;' I felt more comfortable with the snide remarks directed at me by the police officers, they at least, seemed honest. This was a situation that would continue throughout much of my life, and my ability to manipulate such relationships in order to continue and even justify my behaviour was matched only by my contempt. If I was wrong in my assessment of the social worker, this was my perception of her and in such circumstances perception is more important than reality.

This feeling was initially replicated with my first genuine engagement with education at the age of 30. As a working class man that had very little secondary education, my concept of colleges and universities had been coloured more by media representations and stereo types than reality: I did not know anyone that had, or was studying for a degree. Anyone with as much as an 'A' Level was deemed by me to be an academic who knew more about everything than I did. When I first became involved with FE, HE and later, what we call in the UK, widening participation my perception was that these 'academics' also knew more about me than I did. As a FE Student, I found this to be intimidating and disempowering and as a HE student, frustrating; as a worker whose peers are predominantly middle class and whose knowledge base is mainly theoretical and often ideological, I find this attitude infuriating.

What makes Open Book different is that we've used our personal experiences of the deficiencies both in statutory education and in those services intended to deal with the fallout of the system's failure.

There has been a vast amount of research conducted and numerous publications in relation to how we should facilitate a pathway from social exclusion into education. Indeed, it is this very research that has and is, directing social provision and widening participation strategy and yet the percentage of those from working class backgrounds making up the populations of our HE institutions has not moved since the sixties; we can only conclude that this research is flawed. At Open Book we recognised that this 'traditional' methodology needed to be completely deconstructed and that we needed

to develop a fresh non-traditional strategy to engage non-traditional students, those failed by the system first time around.

From the outset a direct, student centred focus on 'social exclusion' and education was used as the basis for the formulation of both the programme and indeed, the approach used with students. Important too initially, were personal observations and conclusions made whilst both a client of agencies, including the Probation Service and various organisations that work with addiction, and as a tutor working with probation clients. Whilst these observations and conclusions were based upon personal experience and insight gained as a result, they were an important element in the methodological approach that eventually developed. It is interesting that conversations with the project's students highlight many common experiences.

Many of our students have similar experiences. One student, who effectively had no formal education from the age of 12, a victim of domestic violence and a resulting mental breakdown that has a long history of working with professional social and mental health workers wrote of Open Book:

"...It has offered me a sense of independence, building blocks for my confidence and a sense of being and without it I am positive that I would have had no future to look forward to...It has taken almost my whole life to find someone, somewhere, somehow who would genuinely take me as a worthy member of the human race. That priority was always only ever understood by my children previously. It is so good to know that the people at Open Book believe in me too. Thank you...you have given me so much more to get up for..."

The most important word here is: ‘genuinely.’ Despite the extensive history of outside intervention in the student’s life, there is the personal perception that she had never ‘genuinely’ been taken as a ‘worthy member of the human race.’ Such perceptions are surely a contributing factor in an individual’s social and educational exclusion.

I am not suggesting that only people that have personal experience of ‘marginalisation’ are equipped to work with this group. However, it is an imperative that to achieve positive outcomes, the worker has the ability to gain the students’ trusts; this is a ‘skill’ that is very difficult to acquire. While training is able to provide an understanding of key theoretical aspects surrounding social exclusion, it is reasonable to contend, that training in itself cannot replace insight gained through direct experience of such. Workers that have been able to gain this personal insight are also living examples to the students of what can be achieved; not only is the worker an advisor, they are also the embodiment of what is being extolled and as such can be seen by the student as a role model.

Discussions with Open Book students would indicate, that there is the feeling that they have been seen as “charity cases” or “worthy causes” in the past and that this is disempowering. Such students, though they certainly are victims of circumstance, must not be considered as victims; this implies powerlessness. If the worker sees a student, either consciously or unconsciously, as an object for pity, then this will inevitably lead to a power imbalance in the worker/student relationship and means that the worker automatically assumes a position of superiority. This is simply a

continuation of what has gone before and in most cases, will lead to failure; it is a situation that can be exploited by both worker and student to a negative end. We would argue that the concept of empowerment is a sham. In many ways, the Project has succeeded by daring to challenge the hegemony of provision based upon a purely academic understanding of the student group and redressed a power imbalance between practitioner expertise and client experience.

It has taken the concept of 'empowerment' away from those who mistakenly believe they alone can offer it and put it back into the hands of those that are disempowered by that very idea.

Sometimes, I look around our Students' Union Bar and I see young people with their lives ahead of them, relaxed, happy, and I think about when I was a young man, about the many people that I grew up with, who should be my age now but who are dead, some that are in prison. Some murdered, some have murdered. Some have overdosed or died as the result of poisoning their bodies, one, a young woman, stuffed down a chute like a piece of rubbish. And as I watch I often wonder, what is different about them? What is it that dictates that some of us have lives and others have an existence?

Accidents of birth are what separate us, accidents of birth dictate our aspiration levels, the type of education we get and consequently, the life we can expect.

Because of these accidents of birth, there are people being born into our community in the UK and in other parts of Europe in 2007 that have a life expectancy comparable to

that of someone living in the 19th Century; in the UK, this has become the inevitability of a system that treats learning as a means to a purely economic end. At Open Book, we sell education as a means to personal self fulfilment, development and enlightenment; education for education's sake.

It is our responsibility as educators and community workers to ensure that we do everything we can to offer alternatives. Anyone that rests on their laurels, and there are some, need to be reminded why we are doing what we do, need to recognise that this is more than a career, forgive me for sounding dramatic here, it really is a matter of life and death.

There are many friends here today, good people, people that are resolute, whose motivation cannot be questioned. To you I say, we need to weed out those amongst us that are doing this work for the wrong reasons, you know, the ones that carry their liberal newspapers in the same way us chavs wear our labels.

I've seen a worker from our field of work mimic a working class delivery driver as a Monty - Pythonesque cockney Neanderthal. I've heard workers talk about tabloid readers, about low life, laugh at the so called chav-dress code popular amongst the UK's working class and then have the audacity to go away and debate why it's so difficult to engage working class people in education! These people, don't like our clothes, scorn what we read and deride our culture, I need to ask what is it about us they actually like?

I'm sick of ineffectual, facile intellectual posers who hide their prejudice behind a veneer of liberalism and whose practices and ideals are as pernicious as those of the most overt bigot; give me an honest reactionary any day, at least we know where we stand.

They come into our communities with a passively rabid zeal to civilise us chavs, chavettes and ethnic minority groups to recreate us in their own image.

It would make even the most ardent 19th century colonialist blush. They are not a part of the solution; they are part of the problem.

There are some who claim that our drive to raise and support the aspirations of those failed by the education system is leading to dumbing down, to a lowering of standards. To them I say come and meet us, join our students in debate and learn something. Others accuse us of social engineering, to them I say: come with me to the London borough they're now calling Peck-Nam, come with me to the Housing Estates of Moss-side in Manchester, come to Liverpool, come to Birmingham, come to any inner city in the UK.

Then come to the grave-yards of Great Britain, look at the head stones of the young dead and I'll show you social engineering on an unimaginable scale. That's why we at Open Book will never work to find new ways to put young working class people into the low paid drudgery of working class jobs. That's why we will never apologise for raising aspiration, will work harder than ever to support that aspiration, because we have lived those lives; we understand better than any academic, any social commentator or any politician where social engineering leads because our people

have been and still are the victims of social engineering and we will do whatever is in our power to bring an end to the social engineering.

As workers in the field, we have a great opportunity here to change the future, to create, through education and social policy, a more tolerant community, a better democracy and a more equal society. Our task is massive; don't be content to tick boxes.

I'm now handing over to a man for whom I have the utmost respect and admiration, a man that was written off as a child and for most of his adult life as a problem. A man who when he wanted so desperately to change his life, to move out of the criminal world was offered fork lift driving courses by the probation services. Anthony is someone who has battled dyslexia and is still fighting enormous odds to achieve through education; he is now an undergraduate studying criminology. He is one of many Open Book Students but he is also someone that I am honoured to call a best friend: Anthony Hall.