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Exploring Bourdieu for Engineering Education Research

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Conference Topic: Gender and Diversity in Engineering Education

Keywords: Diversity, Student success, Bourdieu, Habitus

This paper explores the potential for the work and theories of Pierre Bourdieu to provide an alternative approach to engineering education research on student diversity. Bourdieu's theories were developed as a means of exploring the role of social class on individual aspirations and behaviour. Current governmental and institutional aims to diversify the intake of engineering students [1] renders it appropriate for researchers to explore the motivations behind student decisions to study engineering. Issues of academic performance, retention and progression in an engineering program can be better understood against the background of individual student choice and behaviour.

Bourdieu, an eminent French sociologist of the late 20th century, was most concerned with identifying and articulating the societal factors that perpetuate the 'status-quo' of a hierarchical social structure [2]. He saw educational systems as a key factor in the perpetuation and reproduction of social structures and so focused much of his work on educational settings [3]. Bourdieu's concept of habitus and its relationship to his concepts of field, cultural capital and dispositions form a theoretical framework and the basis of a methodology which enable the rigorous investigation of human actions and interactions [4].



His theories can be directly applied to questions of why students choose a particular career path and their subsequent behaviour and academic performance once within an educational institution [3]. He proposes that whether students stay in school or drop out is largely determined by their perceptions of the probability of success for students of their background [5].

As yet, Bourdieu's concepts have not been widely used as a framework within engineering education research; his theories are complex, fluid and relatively inaccessible to the novice sociologist [5]. Bourdieu's work presents a challenge to engineering education researchers to adopt or adapt this theoretical framework to underpin new investigations into engineering education phenomena. This paper will discuss his theories as a framework for future investigations into student choices (of engineering as a career, institution of study and mode of study); academic performance; retention and progression; institutional strategy and subsequent career trajectories. ■

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