

Stand and Deliver?: Affect Overload & Intersected Antagonisms

Context

One billion pounds was cut from the UK higher education budget in 2009-2010. The university has been hitherto an influential *public* institution (Holmwood, 2011; Inglis, 2011) generating a range of crucial if unequally distributed social, educational and cultural opportunities. The Browne Report (BIS 2010) gestured to this plurality but, given that the appetite for public financing had diminished, was tasked to make recommendations for delivering a more ‘sustainable’ – effectively a privatised system. Browne proposed a new settlement redistributing the cost from the public to the graduate purse (albeit on a sliding scale and with bursaries and other emoluments). This logic was recast in the subsequent White Paper as ‘*Students at the Heart of the System*’ (BIS, 2011) coating the increase in student indebtedness with the allure of their power as the consumer voice.

The vocabulary of the market has become viral in the higher education sector. Recent pronouncement by Steve Outram – a senior advisor for the HEA ‘Students as partners change programme’, condenses the new ‘terms of trade’ thus:

‘It’s a different mind-set. It’s not ‘This is what we will do to you’. It’s not even ‘This is what we will do with you’ It’s more ‘Tell us what you would like us to do’ (Guardian Education June 12th 2012, p35).

Indications of this new subject position of ‘students as customers’ drop into my email box in increasing numbers. Students intent on ‘complaining’ are routinely invoking the subject positions of being the ‘fee-paying customer’ and thus of ‘you’ being ‘the (failed) service provider’ of the ‘product’. Surprisingly little is known but much is assumed (Hey & Morley, 2011; Hey, 2011; Lynch, 2009) about the seemingly endless appetite, capacity and capabilities of higher education (HE) to ‘deliver’ these changes – to absorb, manage and endure which almost always seems to require someone does more work (Palmer and Dunford, 2002; Watson, 2010). All of this has consequences for institutional flourishing, but for academic ‘providers’ in the context of a recession, this holds some specific personal and emotionally loaded apprehensions. It is these I wish to acknowledge and describe not least because, change can be perceived as systems driven, rather than as a process inhabited by different bodies in space and in relationships.

What are the constraints on the already high levels of productivity achieved in the UK research and teaching communities? As Universities UK evidence shows, (see the website www.universitiesuk.ac.uk) the UK is second only to the USA in terms of research productivity but with far lower levels of investment but with far less resources. Will providing more ‘key information sets’ stoke an ‘entitlement culture’ that erodes the psychological contract (Robinson and Rousseau 1994) between academics and students, previously reliant on an investment in academic professionalism. What about any student demands ‘unmet’ – what about our evaluations? How much time do we have to dispose of when we are already called upon to develop research, publish and make an ‘impact’? (Evans, 2010)

The effect of work intensification have already been remarked on (Probert, 2005), the consequent general rise in levels of stress have been quantified and reported to the (UCU, 2008) by Kinman and Jones. In a recession, precariousness, identified by Cate Watson, (2010), is now added to, work intensification. Fears about work commitments and pressures to perform bear down most fiercely on junior and casualised staff in any organisation but given the coincident rising expectations of students exercising their voice, we could be in for a perfect storm.

The Affective Loading of Change and its ‘management’: Immeasurable Stress?

In this paper, I argue for a recognition of the affective loadings on academics (and professional staff) entailed in responding to these ‘privatisation’ logics which could place ‘immature consumers’ (Brown, cited in Swain, 2012, *Education Guardian*).as unaccountable arbiters of pedagogic relations and teaching quality to expect what cannot be given in terms of the competing demands on staff.

I do so to question the tendency to consign the discussion of ‘emotion’ in higher education to the realm of pathology – a move that effectively ‘privatises’ such concerns under the heading of individual ‘stress’. Robotham & Julian, (2006 p.114) argue ‘measuring stress’ is inadequate to the task of fully understanding it, hence I wish to *reconceptualise* it and its converse - well-being through a psycho-social vocabulary (Hey & Leathwood, 2009; Hey 2011). The paper will seek to move from seeing ‘stress’ in terms of individual psychology to work with the idea of ‘social quality’ – a concept related to matters of organisational levels of trust (Ward and Meyer, 2009). This rethinking will register the force of organisational culture, notably the psychic and social entanglements that make up the ‘relations of ruling’.

The agonistic forces of competition constructing the habitus of HE is hardly new of course – HE’s have had audit instruments aplenty : some applied to overall university performance (NSS, THE, Global rankings); and other mundane but potentially shaming evaluative routines for the individual academic, such as the Research Excellence Framework. But many commentators have noted the increased hostility of related professional reviewing processes (Gill, 2009) which produce a displacement of anger onto the ‘other’, about what is in effect a shared pain of being overstretched – this tendency to retribution rather than collective resistance seems even more likely now when one has to do more (students and their voice) with less (academics and their time).

This equation implies that the most resourced groups (be they elite parents and HEI’s and individual students and academics) will, though ‘the logic of necessity’ strive to consolidate their privileged field advantage –by bring into being appropriations of each other, a sort of concerted grand larceny of a once public asset though their conscious or unconscious forms of individual agency and intentionality (Hey and Morley, 2011). In sum, the violent tempo/er of higher education is likely to heat up. My paper points to some emerging evidence that this is the case.

References

- BIS, (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills) (2011) 'Higher education: students at the heart of the system' <http://c561635.r35.cf2.rackcdn.com/11-944-WP-students-at-heart.pdf>.
- The Browne Report - An independent review of higher education funding and student finance in England. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/>
- Evans, M (2010) Higher Education in recessionary times: a UK colloquium *Teaching in Higher Education* 15 (5) 615-621.
- Hey, V; Morley, L. (2011) Imagining the University of the future: eyes wide open? Expanding the feminist Imaginary through critical and feminist ruminations in and on the university Special Issue Challenge, Change or Crisis in Global Higher Education? *Contemporary Social Science* 6 (2): 165-174.
- Hey, V. (2011) Affective asymmetries: academics, austerity and the mis/recognition of emotion *Contemporary Social Science* Special Issue, Challenge, Change or Crisis in Higher Education? 6 (2): 207-222.
- Hey, V.; Leathwood, C. (2009) Passionate Attachments Higher Education, Policy, Knowledge, Emotion and Social Justice *Higher Education Policy* (2009) 22, 101–118. doi:10.1057/hep.2008.34
- Holmwood, J. (2011) (ed) *Manifesto for a Public University*, Bloomsbury Academic, London,
- Inglis, F. (2011) Economical with the actualite (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=417654&c=2>)
- Gill, R (2009) Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia in Flood, R. & Gill, R. (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. London: Routledge
- Jenkins, B and Leaman, J. (2010) Editorial Discussion Statement: Crisis, Austerity and Higher Education Invitation to Respond *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 18 (4): 443-446
- Kinman G, Jones F (2004). "Working to the Limit: Stress and Work - Life Balance in Academic and Academic Related Employees in the UK". Association of University Teachers. 1-65
- Lynch, K. (2009) Carelessness: A Hidden Doxa of Higher Education Paper presented at the Imagining the University of the Future Seminar Series University of Sussex, (27th April, 2009)
- Morley, L. (2011) Misogyny posing as measurement: disrupting the feminisation crisis discourse *Contemporary Social Science* Special Issue, Challenge, Change or Crisis in Higher Education? 6 (2) 223-235.
- Palmer, I.; Dunford, R. 2002, 'Who says change can be managed?' *Positions, perspectives and problematic* , *Strategic Change*, 11, (5):234-51.
- Swain, H. How far should student power go? *EducationGuardian.co.uk* 12th June 2012 p35
- Robinson, S.L. & Rousseau, D.M. (1994). 'Violating the psychological contract: Not the exception but the norm' *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 15, pp. 245-259. <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/POLICYANDRESEARCH/POLICYAREAS/Pages/Research.aspx> (Accessed 16th August 2011)
- Watson, C. (2010) Accountability, transparency, redundancy: academic identities in an era of 'excellence' *British*

