

G1.3 Beaumaris Lounge Thursday 6 December 9.00-11.00

Casualised Academic Staff and the Lecturer-Student relationship: power, legitimacy and (im)permanence (0506)

Barbara Read¹, Carole Leathwood² ¹University of Glasgow, United Kingdom ²London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

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This paper focuses on findings from a study of academics on short-term, insecure or ‘casualised’ contracts, and their perceptions of the effect their contract status has on the nature and quality of their teaching and interactions with students.

In recent years, increasing international attention has been paid to the increase in the ‘casualization’ of labour within academia in the last two decades, even in the richest countries of the Global North (Lane and Hare, 2014; Acker et al., 2016; Gupta et al. 2016; Acker and Haque, 2017; Marklein, 2017). Building on such important work, the original contribution and significance of this paper lies in the particular attention given to the as yet under-researched area of the effects of casualised contracts specifically on the lecturer’s *teaching* and the *teacher-student relationship* (although see Lopes and Dewan, 2014). In particular we will be exploring the ways in which the contingent nature of the casualised lecturer challenges the more traditional binary conception of the expert, permanent lecturer and the novice/apprentice temporary student, in ways that produce a number of tensions and anxieties in ongoing representation of self and other in interaction, but also potential opportunities for challenge and resistance.

Much has been written on the changing nature of the lecturer/student relationship in academia with the pervasive rise of neoliberal influence on ‘traditional’ academic cultures and practices. Traditionally lecturers are perceived as holding a high level of status and authority in relation to their students. Bourdieu for example notes that the cultural and symbolic capital acquired by the tutor through the status of their occupation and qualifications gives their communications a greater legitimacy than the student (Bourdieu, 1988, 1991; see also Grant, 1997). Notably, also, the discursive construction of the ‘typical’ academic was historically (and remains, implicitly) the figure of the white, middle- or upper-class male, with no caring responsibilities – potentially influencing the ways in which lecturers are interpreted by students (and other staff) as more or less ‘authentic’ or ‘legitimate’ in their roles.

In recent years research in this area has also pointed to a significant disruption to the ‘traditional’ authority of the lecturer as a result of the rise of neoliberalist policies and practices that emphasise student entitlement as consumers of knowledge, with such knowledge perceived as a commodity to be sold by the university) (Marginson, 1994; Leathwood and Read, 2009) – although research has shown that this perception of the lecturer-university/student relationship is one that tends to fit most closely with middle-class (and white, masculine) subject positions (Skeggs, 2004; Reay et al 2005). As yet, however, there has been little attention paid to potential changes (and their gendered, classed and racialised inflections) in such relationships as a result of the rise of casualised contracts amongst teaching staff, a gap we aim to address here.

Methodology

Obtaining data via qualitative interview was considered to be the most effective way of exploring the views of participants and their perceptions of their teaching & learning experiences in HE. Email interviews have increasingly been successfully utilized in social science research (see e.g. Burns 2010) and allow for participants to respond to questions at their own time and pace, and with the ability to edit their written answers before sending to the researcher. The paper will focus on email interviews with 19 participants (16 women and 3 men), conducted in two stages with additional followups. All participants undertake some teaching in UK higher education institutions as part of their role, and are (or were until very recently) on temporary, fixed-term or hourly paid contracts.

We take an interpretivist epistemological position, using Creswell and Miller's (2000) definition of validity as "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p.3). In order to enhance validity in this way, we are aided by the method of email interviews, which allows the participant a higher degree of agency in terms of time to prepare their answers, and ability to edit their answers before sending to the researcher. We also aimed to heighten validity in our analysis of responses by applying a rigorous thematic analytic process, in which initial coding of the data by both researchers were used as a basis for the establishment of broader 'themes' generated in the data.

Findings and Conclusions

At the time of writing analysis is ongoing, although the following themes have emerged, relating to participants' perceptions as to how far, and in what ways:

- ...students are aware of their contract status, and whether they perceive this to affect students' conceptions of their legitimacy and authority in the classroom
- ...their contract status affects their relationship with their students, irrespective of students' knowledge of their status
- ...they 'manage' their presentation of self in order to 'cover up' or 'hide' their contract status, or difficulties arising from their contract status – and why
- ...they voluntarily disclose their contract status to students, and why

In analysing these issues we explore the ways in which these findings point to new and complex ways in which 'traditional' notions of the academic-student relationship are disrupted and recontextualised in current times by the contract status of lecturers; how lecturers perceive students- and sometimes other staff, and even themselves – to retain a perception of 'legitimate' or 'real' academics as permanent staff, bound to the institution by spatial markers of legitimacy such as permanent office space and a 'name on the door'; the emotional cost of 'covering up' difficulties generated by the effects of casualised status on teaching, either through a desire to minimise a reading of themselves as illegitimate in the eyes of students – or a desire to 'save face' for the *university* itself; and alternatively, the complexities of disclosure of status, and the opportunities of events like the recent UK-wide industrial action to allow for a discussion of such issues with students on a wider social/structural level in relation to social justice and the future of the academy.

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