

139 Academic resistance in higher education institutions during times of precarity

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant upheaval upon higher education institutions around the world, heightening neoliberal institutional responses and academic precarity. However, while much of the literature assumes that academics have been passive during this upheaval, this paper analyses the forms of resistance of teacher education academics from Australia and New Zealand (n=13) that emerged during lengthy pandemic lockdowns. Drawing on feminist, post-structural and critical pedagogy theoretical understandings of resistance, we propose and illustrate three framings of resistance: 'public opposition as resistance', 'education as resistance', and 'everyday activism as resistance'. Participants described how they resisted changes individually and collectively by working to maintain quality education, collegiality, criticality and care. Such diverse forms of resistance created a 'crack' in the hegemonic logic and the precariousness of daily academic life, creating new possibilities for critical consciousness, creativity and collegiality even during pandemic times when what academics held most dearly was under threat.

Full paper

An emerging body of literature suggests that for many academics, the neoliberal conditions of higher education have been further heightened since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Blackmore 2020; McDougall 2021; McGaughey et al. 2021). However, much of this literature assumes academics have been passive during this significant upheaval of their institutions, and that the neoliberal project is all-encompassing and totalising. Much less attention has been given to how academics have resisted these changes and worked to maintain quality education, collegiality, criticality and care. In this paper, we consider the experiences of teacher education academics from Australia and New Zealand (n=13) who were interviewed during the height of the pandemic lockdowns. What emerged from these interviews was a sense that the capacity to resist the forces of neoliberalism became very important to our participants at this precarious time for the academy, and that this took multiple, and often unseen, forms.

Our focus on academic resistance is contextualised by questions about the role of the university in contemporary society and by the degree to which neoliberalism in higher education is a totalising force. Drawing on feminist, post-structural and critical pedagogy theoretical understandings of resistance, we understood that 'domination is always partial and leaky' (Giroux 2000) and that resistance is much more than 'fighting' or 'objecting' and can include multiple forms of action and non-action, including refusal (Zembylas 2021), re-inscription, adaptation and subversion (Manathunga and Bottrell 2019; Thomas and Davies 2005; Webb 2018).

Our research involved semi-structured interviews with 13 teacher education academics who were employed within a university faculty or school of education at recruitment. As our research took place at a time when most of the research team and participants were in lockdown scenarios, our methodological strategies were restricted to online interviews rather than face-to-face or more embodied options such as observations. Nine academics were recruited from eight Australian universities while four academics were recruited from two New Zealand universities.

Our analysis revealed three framings of resistance: 'public opposition as resistance', 'education as resistance', and 'everyday activism as resistance'. While resistance is most commonly understood as an oppositional act that is publicly expressed and viewed (Johansson and Vinthagen 2014), our interviews found few examples of this, in all

likelihood reflecting the precarious times of the pandemic when public displays such as protests were relatively rare (Pleyers 2020). However, all participants gave examples of using education as a form of resistance in Freirean and critical pedagogical styles – by drawing on a strategic selection of critical knowledge to expose their students to and strategies which enhanced their critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) as well as advocating for utopian pedagogies which encouraged alternative ways of being that humanised deeply neoliberal spaces. Finally, participants gave examples of everyday acts of resistance that sought to build caring collaborative relationships within ‘uncaring’ institutions that at times refused to accept policies which undermined both education and each other.

While our study was conducted at a very specific point in time of precarity for the academy and revealed some of the significant constraints under which academics continue to act and work, it also pointed to the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Manathunga and Bottrell 2019, 2) that still persist in the contemporary, post-colonial university for critical resistance. Our study helped to develop a three-fold framing of academic resistance during the pandemic that is theoretically infused and empirically substantiated. We propose this generative framing could support future research and understandings of resistance which support and advocate for connection, creativity and the promotion of the pedagogies of hope and enable the construction of alternative identities and meaning for educators as well as for the future practitioners they seek to produce.

References

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