

To 'resist where we are': challenges of active resistance in a marketised academy

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper seeks to encourage a debate around the challenges of resisting a systemic neoliberal ideology, described within pedagogical literature as a contemporary 'crisis' for Higher Education.

This paper frames neoliberalism as the prioritisation of marketised goals for Higher Education, exhibited through imposition of metrics, managerialism and value for money; so, HE as a private 'good'.

Through this framing, this paper explores potentialities for 'actively' resisting this neoliberal discourse. Specifically, this paper recommends scheduling sessions, within formal teaching spaces, for staff and students to talk openly, chaotically and emotionally about experiences of personal failure. Within these timetabled teaching spaces, the session's aim is to critically explore whether experiences of failure are reductively framed against notions of individualism and the extrinsic goal of the 'perfect' neoliberal subject. Through a collective and cooperative approach, it is hoped that through these sessions participants can better 'resist where we are' within HE.

Full paper

Within pedagogical literature, there is passion, disquiet, activism and anger over the 'crisis' occurring within contemporary HE

British higher education – or at least the core functions of student education and academic research – has increasingly been provided on market or 'quasi-market' lines (Brown with Carasso 2013, p.2)

The backdrop for this paper is the notion of 'faith' in the market: that the market is 'correct', and therefore a marketised approach should be the overarching focus for 'successful' Higher Education institutions ('HEI'). Framed through an economic lens, the market is effectively the arena for exchanges of economic value between parties, posited as 'free' in the sense of an absence of overbearing restrictions on the successful operation of this market exchange.

Importantly, despite free market thinking incorporating a laissez-faire attitude to restriction of market exchanges, HEIs have nonetheless seen an interventionist attitude by UK governments of perpetuating marketised principles. So, neoliberalism includes a deleterious effect from 'above' in the form of government policy e.g. the Dearing Report of 1997, and the Browne Review of 2010.

This paper posits that 'marketisation' reflects a wider neoliberal ideology, specifically in that neoliberalism provides order and logic to the functioning of market systems. Neoliberalism is held up as 'true', defended against backlash by 'the inherent economic value' of prices and therefore of success: "Neoliberals argue that, unlike other knowledge, prices in a free market are not based on the knowledge of individual human beings but on logical and mathematical knowledge that is true by definition" (Busch 2017, p. 14)

Through this approach, where 'core' values of education are measured against economic progress, other notions of value can be de-prioritised or ignored. To achieve economic 'progress', HEI's cannot ignore competitive influence in the HE market: managers must deliver economic 'effectiveness' and ensure value for money to students, and institutions must hyper audit 'metrics' of quality, both in terms of teaching and research.

"New liberal thinking in education has succeeded in doing what classical liberalism did not do: it subordinates and trivializes education that has no market value" (Lynch 2010, p. 62).

It is this attitude of HE being a private good over a public utility, that frames this paper's debate over resistance.

What are we resisting for?

This paper acknowledges the challenges of agreeing on common goals of resistance, and more deeply whether resistance within HE is increasingly futile:

To struggle where you are in academia, therefore, is to break with the hegemony that sees the university as beyond reproach....if we take a pay packet and relative job security from our university employment, we have an obligation to also struggle where we are (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, pg 146-147)

So, those working in HEIs cannot ignore the system within which they operate, and the complicity by working. Notwithstanding this, given the relative positions of privilege for many teaching and researching in HE, there is an obligation to actively resist 'where we are'.

How do we actively resist? - failure loves company

This paper hopes to debate resistance in the form of exploring, with students, actively 'failing' from the dominant discourse of neoliberal ideology. This paper uses the work of Jack Halberstam as inspiration for this approach:

"under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (Halberstam 2011, p. 2)

So, framed in such terms, resistance acts as a collective sharing of feelings of failure when framed against the expectations of neoliberal 'success'. The aim of sharing failure is a critical and cooperative discussion of the legitimacy of marketised success.

This paper argues that there should be, incorporated into formal teaching spaces, sessions where the notion of the 'perfect' neoliberal subject is framed and critically analysed by staff and students together. Perfection may be critiqued variously as whiteness, male, cis gendered, able bodied, middle class etc.

By encouraging the sharing of stories of where students and staff 'fail' against this vision, the hope is that fears and insecurities arising out of a failure from dominant discourse can be acknowledged and contested.

Importantly, this method of resistance is fundamentally not about a co-option of failure framed purely as academic failure, nor as a precursor to how to achieve a productive mindset of the 'before and after' narrative. Instead, the focus is to encourage a more pluralistic attitude to ways of becoming and embracing HE and beyond for students.

References

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