

What's wrong with 'the student experience'? (0103)

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Discourses must be treated – not as groups of signs – but as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’. (Foucault 2002: 54) This formative role of discourse is fundamentally concerned with relationships of power. Within higher education there has been a sustained effort, from a variety of sources, to attend to ‘the student voice’ which is cast as lacking in power, and of late this has manifested itself in the ubiquitous use of the phrase ‘the student experience’. In this paper a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of recent selected HE policy documents demonstrates how this phrase has rapidly come to prominence in the last decade or so. I explore the meaning-giving power of ‘the student experience’ and how it has developed within key UK government and quasi-government discourse.

The analysis begins with extracts of the 2003 UK government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) which constructs students as consumers who are ‘entitled to be taught well’ [para 4.1] All students are assumed to be capable of free rational choice, unimpeded by the limitations of social background or financial resource. By 2009 the report of the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills is asserting that, ‘The experience of the student is at the heart of higher education’. *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, from the department of Business, Innovations and Skills, has a chapter entitled ‘The Student Experience in Higher Education’ and, argues that, as they are the most important clients of higher education, students’ own assessments of the service they receive at university should be central to our judgement of the success of our higher education system. [page 70]

‘The student experience’ has come to be used as a singular reified entity. ‘Student’ becomes an adjective describing a homogenised ‘experience’ undifferentiated by ethnicity, socio-economic background, age or personal history. Its use precludes questions about where and when this ‘experience’ stops and starts, how it comes about, and how it changes. ‘The student experience’ is wielded as a criterion for judgement about what is and is not worthwhile in higher education. The rhetoric demands the exclusion of and silencing of other accounts of higher education: students are ‘the most important clients’ of HE, and their assessment of it as ‘a service’ ‘should be central to our judgement’. The advent of the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government in the UK has not so far altered the positioning of ‘the student experience’. In June 2010 in speech at Oxford Brookes University the Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willets stated that his first of three priorities is that ‘students enjoy a better university experience’ and that ‘at the centre of this [HE reform] are the students’.

This focus on the student experience has been prominent in the mission statements of all higher education policy agencies. Even when organisations have ostensibly been created to work with staff in higher education, their mission statements centre on ‘the student experience’. It is also evident that there has been a shift in the last few years further away from academics or staff in general. Quality assurance also privileges students’ accounts of their experience, and in particular there is a focus on NSS results and data from Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey.

This near exclusive attention to 'the student experience' has influenced a range of policy initiatives that have funded research and development in higher education. All of these initiatives have revolved around 'teaching and learning'. These include the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The size of these initiatives in financial terms belies the extent of their effect on the kind of research that has been undertaken under their auspices. Two features are worth noting: the emphasis in both FDTL and CETL is firmly on the development of practice: ostensibly a laudable aim. However, the practice in question is usually, though not always, that of academics as teachers. This narrowing of the agenda excludes issues of management, strategy, finance and many other 'practices' that go on in higher education. Second, the ways in which the funds are shared out – first among institutions, then among various staff groups within institutions, and finally among individuals – results in a panoply of small-scale projects with limited impact beyond their local environment and little capacity to question the terms of reference under which funds have been granted. 'Learning and teaching initiatives' acquire their meaning through an intensifying discourse that steadily elevates 'the student experience' and directs scholarship away from critiquing the forces that structure it.

The policy and research focus on 'the student experience' draws attention to day-to-day experiences. In doing so it situates the responsibility for 'the student experience' at the micro level of that interaction. It detracts attention from the meso- and macro- issues of management and resources in higher education. This climate undermines the agency of institutional leaders, academics and students to engage critically in discussions about students' expectations, motivations, practices, limitations, rights, and responsibilities, as well as the resources and management that shape, and are shaped by, students.

In conclusion, 'The student experience' is a meaning-giving and sanctioning rule (Giddens 2003) in the sense that it is an instance of using language to produce the thing that is named. 'The student experience' has become a mantra, apparently used to give students 'a voice' and at the same time constraining that voice by isolating it from other voices around it, and from the complex environment that enables us meaningfully to interpret those voices. We listen only to students' own highly structured accounts of their experience (e.g. through the National Student Survey and destination of leavers survey). This 'rule' is reproduced in policy and institutional practice in higher education in relation to day-to-day management and permeates conversations about strategic direction and aspirations for the future.

References

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