

Utopias and imagination: Creating new time and space in universities¹

Abstract

Drawing on a conceptual framework suggested earlier by Ronald Barnett, this paper aims to analyse time and space in academic life. Time and space are limited but, at the same time, move through contraction and potential expansion. Accordingly, the university might open (or close) horizons for time and space, in an era in which academics have simultaneously to manage many tasks in highly demanding environments. Through a qualitative approach, this study examines how Chilean academics seek to create new time(s) and space(s) in their academic practices. Interviews are currently being conducted with academics from a private and teaching oriented university. The results show an interplay between structure and agency in managing intellectual and discursive space, epistemological space, pedagogical and curricular space and ontological space. From here, a viewpoint that is both utopian and optimistic is proposed, even against the horizon of uncertainty that must necessarily accompany the contemporary academic workplace.

Framework

Contemporary universities require academics to engage in numerous tasks and take on several identities simultaneously. These pressures intensify, as academics are expected to increase their productivity, as the onward march of the entrepreneurial university calls for an expansion of tasks and as audit regimes maintain their grip. In this context, time and space both become crucial aspects of academic life with academics needing to create time and space not only to respond to the multiple demands they are facing but in order to preserve their authentic being as academics.

Time and space are separated but interconnected in academic life:

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'...both time zones and space zones intersect, at crazy and unforeseen angles. The university, accordingly, may be seen as a region precisely of intersecting time zones and space zones' (Barnett, 2011 p. 78)

Building on Lefebvre's work (1991), Barnett (2011) proposes four kinds of spaces: *intellectual and discursive space* (the contribution that academics make to the public sphere); *epistemological space* ('space available to academics to pursue their own research interests'); *pedagogical and curricula space* (the space to create or test the curriculum as a structuring of the students' experience and to work out possibilities in the pedagogical relationship); and *ontological space* (being an academic as such and inhabiting the multiple identities this process implies). These categories are used to analyse the empirical data of this study, in particular to examine the way in which academics manage time and space and adopt strategies to tolerate ambiguity, fragmentation and pressures in order to achieve some kind of order and stability.

Method

A case study is currently being carried in Chile and the results here flow from interviews that are being conducted with academics at a private and teaching oriented university. These academics represent different disciplines, have diverse years of experience in teaching/research/administration tasks and have different conditions of employment; and some of them hold managerial positions.

Results and discussion

Self-evidently, academics can contribute to *pedagogical and the curricular space*. One interviewee enthusiastically spoke of *'creating new pedagogies and using new frameworks to promote learning...I'm now in charge of a team which is testing an innovation, we are working with PBL and I really can see the good results among the students'*.

Regarding *ontological space*, being an academic brings with it tasks that are demanding, stressful and diverse; academics have to manage competing challenges of academic being (Youdell and Armstrong, 2011). One of the academics asks if every academic should teach, research and do administrative tasks; he reflects that nobody can be 'excellent' in all fields. Universities vary however, it appears, in the visibility that attach to different tasks: here, for another interviewee, *'it seems that academics are doing 'nothing' when they are not teaching but, of course, academics are doing several administrative and research tasks at the same time'*.

Even in a teaching-oriented university, in their teaching role alone, academics and the university may be seen to be contributing to the *intellectual and discursive space* of society: *'you are contributing in forming your students for a better society...you are contributing to the society'* and *'Good professionals should make a contribution to the country with their knowledge and skills; that is the mission of this university'*.

The spaces and the time zones of academic life compete with each other. Academics live in the future even as they live in the present, in trying to advance their profile, especially in the research field, because if they do not, they are *'out of the race'*. And here *epistemological space* appears to be closing, hedged in with the demands of production to satisfy both public and state bodies: *'In the end it doesn't matter if you are a respected academic because of your experience and your dedication to academia...it seems more important the amount of papers you have published in high ranked journals ...'*.

Emerging in the data, too, is a sense that administrative tasks are seen as a key to secure better positions and, consequently, better employment contracts, incomes and job stability. In order to reach these kinds of positions it is necessary – in Chile - to have pursued post-graduate study or have been recognised for a long experience in the academia or the professional field.

Accordingly, there is here – additional to the spaces suggested earlier by Barnett - a sense of a *bureaucratic space* becoming a cardinal aspect of the structuring of academic life.

However, there are signs of interplay between structure and agency (Archer, 2003). Both, women and men are working to maintain a kind of firm boundary between both the academic and the family space and time: ‘...when I have to meet my children it doesn’t matter if the university is coming down....my children are first’; ‘if I don’t finish a task during my workday, I simply continue working on it the following day...I avoid bringing academic work to home’ and ‘I don’t like receiving calls from home when I’m working as I don’t like receiving work calls when I’m at home’. In other words, these academics exercise their agency by avoiding been absorbed by their academic duties.

There emerges, therefore, a glimpse of a more optimistic and even utopian view in spite of academics’ challenges and uncertainties: ‘If you have a good idea for teaching or researching, you should be able to develop them....you need both, an intrinsic motivation but also the university needs to gives you the space, the resources and the opportunities to put them in practice... sometimes the university doesn’t give you that space and time....but it depends on you to find the opportunities to pursue what you really want to get for your academic life’. This quotation echoes Barnett’s contention: ‘Being a free spirit is hard work’ (2011, p. 82). To what extent, then, might academics be prepared and willing to search for emancipated time and space in the micro-politics of academic labour and identity management?

References

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