Temporal realities in higher education: different conceptualisations of the future (0061)

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Abstract

The paper will argue that dominant conceptualisations of temporality in higher education are flawed and based on an imaginary projection of time in the 'present future' as empty and open. The neo-liberal policy discourses of employability and social mobility depend on seeing futures as equally open for everyone ignoring the structuring realities of inequality which exist into the future as well as the past. Drawing on the work of Margaret Archer the paper suggests that the rationality of autonomous reflexivity which postulates action based on a calculable future has become less reliable with the intensification of change at the cultural and structural level resulting in greater unpredictability at the personal level. I will argue, however, contra Archer that meta-reflexivity as the dominant mode under conditions of accelerated morphogenesis will benefit students who have more economic resources and cultural capital with which to navigate and negotiate in conditions of uncertainty.

Paper

Until recently there has been relatively little work which deals directly with issues of time and temporality in higher education. One exception is the edited collection *Universities in the Flux of Time* (Gibbs, Ylijoki, Guzmán-Valenzuela &Barnett 2014) which explores the contradictions of speeded up time of global markets (Peters 2014), the conflicting temporalities of university research (Ylijoki 2014) and the tensions between fast and slow time (GuzmánValenzuela & Napoli 2014). What all the contributors are agreed on is that we cannot take time for granted based on commonsense understandings of linear time which seamlessly connects time past, present and future either in terms of regimented clock time or in terms of the phenomenological experiences of time. Temporality in higher education is complex and multiple and viewing higher education through the lens of time opens up questions about policy, practices, and students' and academics' realities as they negotiate, often competing, externalities and experiences of time (Clegg 2010, 2014).

In my own work I have drawn on the sociologist Barbara Adam (1994, 1995) who has been at the forefront of the movement to take time seriously in social analysis. In her earlier work Adam (1995) distinguishes different aspects of time and challenges the assumption that we all live in a linear 'Western' time frame, which can be seen in contrast with the cyclical rhythms of an anthropological past. Rather, she argues for the co-existence and intermingling of different dimensions of time as co-present: time as linear divisible clock time; temporality as our being in time; timing as in 'when' time; and tempo the intensity of time. She synthesises her approach in her 2004 book *Time* which deals historically with the different ways people have lived and imagined time. In her more recent work with Chris Groves she brings these ideas together to deal with the possibilities and ethics of thinking about the future. In this work they distinguish the ways historically futures have been 'told' (through divination), 'tamed' (for example through ritual), and 'traded' (as time becomes commodified). Crucially they argue that contemporary ideas of the future which they

describe as 'futures transformed' involve the subjugation of time to human will whereby the future is presented as open:

> Emptied of content and meaning, the future is simply there, an empty
> space waiting to be filled with our desire, to be shaped traded or formed
> according to rational plans and blueprints, holding out the promise that it
> can be what we want it to be (Adam and Groves 2007, 11)

They present a compelling critique of this sort of thinking and the moral vacuity it produces and propose thinking about the 'future present' which 'as a standpoint [ ] positions us with reference to the deeds and processes already on the way (Adam and Groves 2007, 196). In rejecting the idea of a 'present future' as open and empty they grant ontological status to the latencies already inbuilt in the actions of the present. 'Future present' practices and knowledge involve care towards future generations whose futures are already non-factually but actually entailed in the present (Bhaskar, 2008). This is important since much higher education policy rests on assumptions about the future as a malleable script into which the student can write herself as an employable socially mobile individual. This view of time erases structural inequalities which stretch into the future and the ways in which capital relentlessly restructures these possibilities. We have seen a breakdown of the connections between a university education, high pay, and knowledge rich jobs and witnessed a decline in social mobility in the developed world. These same processes are transforming the global division of labour so that highly educated workers on comparatively but low pay are doing work that was previously considered the preserve of the global north (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011).

Margaret Archer (2012) has analysed these processes through the lens of accelerated morphogenesis in which change is speeded up at both the structural and cultural level. It is not that structure becomes less important but rather that it becomes more difficult to determine what the possibilities of the situation are. Archer argues that this intensification of morphogenesis presents actors with 'contextual incongruity'. This renders communicative reflexivity, which relies on confirmation of our views from others and ties people to their natal origin, and the rational calculation of autonomous reflectivity which underpins social mobility more problematic. The practice of autonomous reflectivity becomes more difficult as routes to economic and other forms of success can no longer be assumed when historically more stable trajectories are being undermined (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011). At a system level Margaret Archer argues that meta-reflexivity becomes the dominant orientation (although not necessarily the most common in a numeric sense). Meta-reflexives:

> are 'contextually incongruous' and also contextually unsettled. They are
> *subversive* towards social constraints and enablements, because of their
> willingness to pay the price of the former in the attempt to live out their idea and
> to forfeit the benefits of the latter. (Archer 2007: 98)

Meta-reflexivity represents one way of dealing with the complex temporalities of the future. I would argue, however, that as well as being subversive meta-reflexivity might also allow agents to maximise their possibilities in the 'future present' in more creative ways than those practiced through autonomous reflexivity. Some meta-reflexives are better positioned both in terms of their ability to adopt this stance and in terms of the capitals at their disposal to navigate the already structurally unequal future.

These are clearly empirical as well as conceptual matters but as sociologists of higher education turn their attention to them we should be aware of the significance of thinking about temporality. Recent work by Jenni Case and colleagues (personal communication) in the South African context following up on students who have left university suggests that it is

those students with enhanced cultural and economic capital have the capacity to change their strategies in negotiating their way through higher education and beyond. We might speculate that the power of meta-reflexivity appears to be a way of navigating futures in turbulent times but the futures they are negotiating are never empty and open.

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