Hidden freedom for lecturers in Higher Education sector margins: finding autonomy and working on ways to keep it (0227)

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This paper explores levels of autonomy experienced by Higher Education [HE] lecturers in College Based Higher Education [CBHE], which is similar to the provision in Community Colleges in the United States of America and the Technical and Further Education Colleges of Australia [TAFE]. In the UK, the growth in CBHE was politically encouraged following the Dearing Report (1997). It was part of a drive to increase vocational skills on a regional level and part of the Widening Participation agenda [WP] to provide wider access for those socio-economic groups less likely to go into HE (Parry et al. 2012). This sector now accounts for 8-10% of HE in the UK (Simmons and Lea, 2013) and it is set to grow further, with the recent White Paper for HE (2016) outlining a move towards more HE provision in non-traditional settings. Consequently, CBHE has begun to draw increasing academic attention and it is recognised as an important area for research in relation to debates on HE and social justice (Avis and Orr, 2016) and the significance of academic identities (Clegg, 2008).

The qualitative methodology of this identity-based study is a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of thirteen CBHE lecturers, from five institutions in North-West England, who participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. A framework for teacher identity research, developed by Clarke (2009), was adapted for this study and used to guide the questions and analysis. The rich data captured provides detail around the individual's background, the self-practice in the role, their relations with authority, and the aspects of fulfilment within each of these areas. This paper considers one significant theme emerging from the data analysis, which is in relation to how these participants found autonomy in HE teaching, within FE, a sector of education which has long-since been known for its neo-liberal managerialism (Gleeson and Shain, 1999).

Where there is strong control of the curriculum from government or subject-based disciplinary bodies there is less freedom for the teacher or lecturer, but with weaker external control there is greater freedom (Bernstein, 1990). Less elite universities and we can include CBHE institutions in this descriptor, offer a regional focus and develop individualised programmes based on local skills needs, giving rise to weaker framing of the curriculum (Ashwin, 2009). This appears to be part of the reason for the participants' control over what they teach, but does not account for all of it.

Daily life for these individuals involves them acting politically and ethically in order to serve both the expectations of their role and, at the same time, find an element of control over what they do. This is an ethico-political struggle as individuals cope with the tensions and interests of different parties and their own identity formation (Clarke, 2009). The lecturer makes ethical decisions in relation to the authority sources around them, what they want to do and who they want to *become*. This sits within the wider set of structures including legislation, policy and institutional directives.

These lecturers had generally taught on FE courses before starting to teach HE and some had been FE students themselves, which is not surprising given the vocational requirements for teaching in FE

Colleges. Therefore, they had experience of the regulated and detailed criteria and curriculum requirements set by FE exam boards, which normally have to be adhered to and which their colleagues and managers are familiar with and understand. However, when teaching on the HE programmes in these settings, there appeared to be less of a struggle in the control over their teaching and classroom practice than they had found in FE. They worked with partner Higher Education Institutions on the creation of modules and programmes, but these were then given to them to teach, largely, how they pleased. There was a consistent theme around the freedom that these individuals experienced in their HE teaching over their other experiences of teaching in FE. Whilst this did not extend to freedom of, for instance, working from home or spending time on research, which might be taken for granted in more traditional HE settings, this autonomy was still valued as a significant benefit of their role.

One reason that these lecturers found such liberty was due to a lack of understanding of their role, from the dominant FE management. This was perceived as being due to the FE managers being very busy and lacking time, and because they did not have a depth of knowledge around the HE work. Consequently they left things to be run by these HE in FE lecturers without much interference on a micro-level, reinforcing the effects of the weak framing. Whilst on the one hand this carried some negatives for those teaching in this marginal sector, for instance a heavy workload due to the domineering FE model, depletion of resources and a lack of value for scholarship and research, it also led to a pocket of freedom. This was generally considered to be liberating; this classroom autonomy included being able to choose content, reading and knowledge base, and the methods for teaching critical thinking and debate. This was framed within high levels of tutor support to ensure success for these WP students. This freedom in the classroom was motivational, leading to a determination to continue in the role despite restrictions and pressures in other areas such as marking turnaround times. They protected this to some extent by positioning, and manipulating authority sources where possible, in order to maintain the advantage of autonomy.

The personal fulfilment of this autonomy appears to motivate the individual to continue teaching HE in these college-based settings, despite the drawbacks of high workload. They are keen to maintain the HE role and proud of their teaching methods and levels of support. Their autonomy gives rise to a particular pedagogy which is important in relation to the identity formation of CBHE lecturers and, significantly, the success and emergent identity of the students, changing lives at a micro-level and raising the need to consider further the implications for this on a macro-level.

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