

H2 Beaumaris 1 Thursday 6 December 9.45 - 10.15

Temporalities of trust and betrayal: teaching and learning in the neoliberal university (0372)

Matthew Bunn¹, Anna Bennett¹, Penny Jane Burke¹ ¹*Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle, Australia*

Abstract

This paper explores accounts of 25 academic staff, 30 undergraduates, and 10 postgraduates in their experience of the tensions within the changing temporal character of an Australian university. It explores how the future-orientated discourse conveyed through the marketised university produces the sense that the experiences and outcomes of study are linear, predictable and already-always known. We draw on data to illustrate that this market promise is often experienced as a betrayal, especially for students from under-represented backgrounds. We hence explore the difficulties for students and staff in navigating this temporally compressed market causality with the aim of opening up recognition that higher education experiences and outcomes are multiple and unfolding.

Paper

The neoliberal shift in HE has produced a temporal individualisation of responsibility (Bennett & Burke, 2017) and requires that more people adopt a neoliberalised form of aspiration, self-responsibility and risk calculation (for example, see Gershon 2011; Skeggs 2004). Universities have increasingly rationalised courses on the basis of this 'possessive individualism' (Macpherson, 2010), one that suggests that students are making independent and responsible calculations about the validity of the course of study that they are undertaking *for their own self-interests*. These discourses are hence entwined with the orientation of university degrees to 'employability'. In this sense, the student is dehistoricised, whereby any individual confronted by the same variables would be able to identify the same choices, risks, opportunities and obstacles.

This instrumental focus on university study builds a disproportionate temporal focus toward the future (Clegg, 2010). As Clegg (2010: 350) notes 'the social justice agenda... is entirely in terms of private benefit and a temporality in which future rewards are discounted against the present investment that students are required to make'. Moreover, it assumes that students, when confronted with a series of options, will choose *the best choice* to better increase the odds of this future coming to be. This folds in an assumption about individual agency as rationalist, as it assumes a general individual ability to forecast the future, and to attempt a quantification of the uncertainties of how events will unfold and hence allow for the construction of possible futures as risks (Beck, 1992; Boholm 2003; Ewald 1991). Yet, this overlooks how the construction of risk, and the availability of 'choice' is part of a schematised, or dis/positional, means of apprehension of the social world (Bunn, Bennett and Burke, forthcoming). As Clegg (2015: 109) notes 'this stance considerably underestimates the difficulties students experience in imaginatively projecting themselves into such futures' (Clegg, 2015: 109).

Drawing from in-depth interviews with 25 academic staff, 30 undergraduates, and 10 postgraduates at an Australian university, we explore the tensions that this discourse of university study produces in the experiences of teaching and learning. We argue that the rationalised and calculable notions that underpin dominant discourses of HE are incongruent with the ways in which the embodied and emotional experiences of HE are practiced. Rather, a substantial amount of this expectation relies on trust, faith and optimism on the part of the student. From our project data, students and staff emphasise that understandings of learning, what is being learnt, and why it is being learnt, *take time*.

By the nature of the process of not knowing what will be known, many students also take time in coming to understand what the character of learning will be.

For many academic staff, students are seen as increasingly coming to university with expectations of outcomes that are seen to flatten out serendipity, curiosity and exploration as part of education, which produces unpredictable results. A marketised desire for 'bare pedagogy' (Giroux, 1010) also reduces the role of the academic teacher to *provider*. This ignores the skill and expertise required to understand what is known by students, what needs to be known and the duration of this process. In addition, perceptions projected by institutional marketing to students suggests that no challenges or disruptions might be reasonably expected within university study.

Academics also talked about the need for students to trust in the process of teaching. The rationale for particular learning can take time to become perceptible, and require more than a cognitivist apprehension, as knowledge and understanding, whether for positive or negative outcomes, *unfold* throughout study. Teaching staff explained that students require trust (as a deeply temporalised notion), in both teacher and institution, for the exercise to come to fruition. But, as students conveyed, this same experience can lead to betrayal, as they come to see that the specific result that they first anticipated becomes less likely (especially for non-traditional students). Academics recognise this and many explained that they believe the institution is betraying students through providing narratives of university degrees as having a direct economic transferability.

In the differential experience of outcomes, students and staff must navigate the consequences of broken trust in market promises and its optimism. These often manifest as individualised guilt (Bunn, Bennett and Burke, forthcoming), shame (Burke, 2017; Scheff 2014) and betrayal. The inner struggles to teach and to learn in the future-saturated university are webbed into the formative doxic power of economic logic being applied to HE. As universities offer *certainty* as a means of attracting young people into the educational system, it faces the tensions of these students being prepared for a yet-to-be-determined economic relevance. Universities are in the processes of circumventing the building of enduring trust through something more akin to a consumer guarantee, whereby students do not need to trust in the process of learning, but rather can demand a particular learning outcome. The construction of the potential university student as an agent equipped to smoothly and individually navigate university, to construct the future as certain and quantifiable, overlooks that to learn about the value of university study, students must *spend time* with it to come to know that knowing is never certain nor complete.

References

Adam B (2004) *Time*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

Bennett A and Burke PJ (2017). Re/conceptualising time and temporality: an exploration of time in higher education, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. Online First.

Boholm A (2003) The Cultural Nature of Risk: Can There be an Anthropology of Uncertainty? *Ethnos*. 68:2: 159-178.

- Bunn M Bennett A and Burke PJ (forthcoming) In the anytime: flexible time structures, student experience and temporal equity in higher education. *Time and Society*.
- Burke PJ (2017). Difference in higher education pedagogies: gender, emotion and shame. *Gender and education*, 29(4), 430–444.
- Clegg S (2010) Time future – the dominant discourse of higher education. *Time and Society*, 19(3): 345-364.
- Clegg S (2015) Different times: temporality, curriculum and powerful knowledge. In: Gibbs P. Ylijoki O H Guzman-Valenzuela C and Barnett R (eds) *Universities in the flux of time: an explanation of time and temporality in university life*. New York: Routledge.
- Ewald F (1991) Insurance and Risk. In: Burchell G Gordon C and Miller P (eds.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gershon I (2011) Neoliberal agency. *Current Anthropology*. 52(4): 537-547.
- Giroux H A (2010) Bare pedagogy and the scourge of neoliberalism: rethinking higher education as a democratic public sphere. *The Educational Forum*. 74(3): 184-196.
- Macpherson CB (2010). The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke.
- Scheff T (2014) The ubiquity of hidden shame in modernity. *Cultural Sociology*. 8 (2): 129-141.
- Skeggs B (2004) Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. In: Adkins L and Skeggs B (eds.) *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.