

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0305

L9 | Caerphilly

Chaired by Pauline Kneale

Thu 12 Dec 2019

14:15 - 14:45

Student writing and compliance in a consumer-based system

Verity J. Aiken¹

¹*Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Increasingly, degrees are sold on the premise that they are worthwhile investments for future employability and prosperity. The attention paid to individualised benefits overshadows other Higher Education virtues such as citizenship and providing a social good. Without a balanced representation of what a degree might stand for, the emphasis on individualised benefits becomes burdensome since the value of a degree is placed almost entirely upon the classification awarded at the end. The weight of the burden is probably no more pronounced for students when they are doing assessments, and for many degrees, when students are writing for assessment. Drawing from 20 semi-structured interviews with students and applying thematic analysis, the paper discusses how writing is seen by student writers as an act of compliance over one of discovery, and how, by extension, learning is limiting and distorted in ways that seem incongruent with Higher Education study.

Paper: Increasingly, degrees are sold on the premise that they are a worthy investment for future employability and individual prosperity (Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan 2018). The attention paid to individualised benefits comes at the expense of other virtues of Higher Education such as citizenship and providing a social good (Garlick 2014). Without a balanced representation of what a degree might stand for, the emphasis on individualised benefits quickly becomes a burden by the way the value of a degree is placed almost entirely upon the classification awarded at the end. The weight of this worry is probably no more pronounced for students when they are doing assessments, and for many degrees, when students are writing for assessment. This research paper explores these tensions within the context of a high stakes, high fee Higher Education system from the perspective of student writers. The discussion gives rise to the secondary point of how the student-as-consumer mantra, commonly used to discuss Higher Education practices, inadequately captures what studying is like for today's students. By contrast, Beck's (1992) Risk Society thesis, with its emphasis on individualisation as a source of friction between having choices and making the right choices, is discussed as offering some alternative glances into what student writing amounts to at the very cusp of writing.

The paper is informed by a small scale qualitative study involving 20 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at Levels 4, 5 and 6 and from a range of degree courses at a UK pre-1992 Higher Education institute. From applying thematic network analysis, the data suggest that writing can become an act of compliance and conformity over one of discovery and learning. By extension, learning in Higher Education for undergraduate students can become a limiting rather than an expansive pursuit that is distorted in ways that appear incongruent with the more traditional notions of Higher Education study, such as personal transformation and knowledge advancement.

While the impact of assessment on student writing is nothing new, the focus of the paper is on the ways, the extent and the vigour to which students account for their own writing as either based upon 'meaning orientations' (Norton et al 2001: 274) or 'reproducing orientations' (Norton et al 2001: 274). Using an academic literacies perspective derived from the works of Lea and Street (1998), the paper considers the notion of what Thesen (2014) refers to as the centripetal forces that goad writing to certain 'centring' conventions. Applied to the context of student writing, it is discussed how centripetal forces can be seen as taking form in the increasing amounts of assessment guidance shaping student writing in ever more constraining ways.

An important consideration stemming from the data analysis is the way that students did not accept that increasingly rigid writing guidance was helpful. On the contrary, students talked about their experiences of *what they saw as having to* write in compliant ways as a type of loss, necessity and sacrifice. While wanting to write in more expansive and experimental ways, the students I talked to found it safer and wiser to stick rigidly to guidance and individual steers from lecturers in order to secure good grades in their work. The paper therefore explores the ways in which the consumer label for Higher education, while capturing the drive for grade gain and capital amassment, does not sufficiently apprehend the ways that some students feel diminished as writers. Rather than students unreflectingly maximising grades through the use of strategies, many saw writing tactically as something they had to do. Writing in ways that were shaped by stipulation, and in ever more dominating ways, was conflicting, troublesome and unwanted from the student point of view. The paper concludes that rather than taking a consumer view of Higher Education, the lens of student writing reveals that Higher Education study can perhaps be better understood through the notion of risk and individualisation, as set out in the theoretical framework of the Beck's (1992) Risk Society thesis.

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