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Transition pedagogies and the neoliberal episteme: What do academics think?

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Abstract*

There has been much discussion of the massification of higher education and its impact on contemporary universities in terms of increased demands on academic staff in the context of neoliberal managerialism, and the power regimes which govern the sector. Less is written about the pedagogies used under neoliberalism. Many academics view tertiary education as both an individually and socially transformative process, and there is a sense that the current discursive environment engenders an inertia wherein this commitment is lost. This paper focusses on a small qualitative study of staff working in two universities at the bottom of the league tables. Their perceptions of pedagogical work and their views of their transformative potential under neoliberalism is discussed. The argument is made that there is the potential for building a space for critical education in contemporary universities. This article explores these issues, arguing that the use of transition pedagogies can create a transformative education.

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Introduction

There is little doubt that higher education is in the midst of seismic change as it becomes increasingly constrained by a range of neoliberal discourses and practices which draw higher education into the economic domain of the marketplace and subject it to the principles of the free market (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Collyer, 2015; Connell, 2013). In a broad sense, Neoliberalism begins from the belief and assertion that market principles should manage social relationships. Institutions and their staff are then compelled or convinced to organise themselves in this way (Amsler, 2014; Connell, 2013). It has been argued that the neoliberal shift underway is moving higher education from an endeavour dedicated to increasing both individual and public good, to one designed to increase the employability of those who come into contact with it (Amsler, 2014; Mavelli, 2014). Connell (2013) goes further than this, arguing that:

Neoliberalism has a definite view of education, understanding it as human capital formation. It is in the business of forming the skills and attitudes needed by a productive workforce – productive in the precise sense of producing an ever-growing mass of profits for the market economy. ‘Human capital’ is a metaphor, and in itself too narrow. But this economic idea does catch an important feature of education, that it is a creative process orientated to the future. (p. 104)

The United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have both engaged in large scale attempts to enrol people from non-university-going backgrounds in universities – with demographic groupings and national targets established (Action on Access, 2009; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales 2008;). Whilst these initiatives are championed as mechanisms to increase social inclusion, equipping students for the demands of modern economies, it could be argued that they are also instruments designed to further neoliberal economies and embed neoliberal reasoning and

managerialism (Amsler, 2014; Marvelli, 2014). Clegg (2008) convincingly argues that neoliberalism appropriated the UK’s Widening Participation project which was set to increase access and promote democratic pedagogies, replacing this liberatory impulse with the promotion of neoliberal accumulation. The results of these initiatives, so far, have been mixed, insofar as some groups have experienced more success than others (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Hughes, 2015; Murphy, 2009).

Sheeran, Brown, and Baker (2007) usefully discuss three competing philosophies of inclusion through providing some analysis of what is precisely meant by the term. They delineate the meritocratic model, the democratic model and the transformative model of inclusion (pp. 251-255). It is not my intention to explore these here, but rather to focus on the last one because it is the transformative educators who find their standpoint most seriously challenged by neoliberal discourse and its resulting practices.

This paper explores the habitus of neoliberal universities, the position of the teaching academic workforce, and the ways in which transition pedagogies offer a disruptive intervention which might better generate the ‘creative process orientated to the future’ which Connell advocates (2013, p. 104). It offers an account of transition pedagogies themselves, theorises their use, and provides some indicative, evaluative accounts from academics experienced in the use of these pedagogies with largely first-in-family students. It concludes by proposing that, despite the fiscal, discursive and structural changes made to universities by neoliberalism, it is possible to create classrooms where students do indeed learn to engage critically with their world.

The neoliberal academic

The changes wrought in universities have forced academics to reconfigure their own

working identities in new and uncomfortable ways (Archer, 2008; Ball, 2012; Clegg, 2008). The pressures arise from an increase in workload, the increases in auditing and attention to metrics generated by managerialist leadership and the proliferation of measures of research quality and volume (Archer, 2008; Fitzgerald, White, & Gunter, 2012). More generally, alongside massification, there is growing pressure for universities to measure and report data related to student attrition, of student experiences, their general perception of a course, the quality of learning and teaching and their graduate outcomes (Richardson & Radloff, 2014). These data are used to build the league tables against which universities benchmark themselves (Turner, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2007).

Naidoo and Williams (2015) convincingly argue that such data regimes have a differentiated impact on universities at different points on the league tables, with those at the lower end bound up in a responsive 'pathology' (p. 218). The pathology results in senior staff at such universities viewing their roles through the lens of the need to raise the university's rank through externally orchestrated metrics, rather than responding to the needs of staff or the student body. In so doing, Naidoo and Williams argue, the very purpose of the institution becomes reshaped.

Alongside these data demands, sits the uncomfortable tradition of teaching being the least rewarded, and least recognised, part of an academic workload whilst also uniquely contributing the key private 'good' of the individual – albeit a good largely gained outside the walls of the university after they have graduated and are making their way in the workplace (Amsler, 2014; Hughes, 2017; Richardson & Radloff, 2014).

But being teaching-focussed can be harmful to an academic career amidst the increasing pressure for research productivity because such a focus is not viewed as being of primary

importance, despite not only many universities' proclamations to the contrary but also the growing recognition that learning and teaching rankings are critical to attracting students in a competitive marketplace (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Richardson & Radloff, 2014).

Under neoliberalism, and the discourses of consumer rights, students have similarly reflexively revised their identity from a relatively subjugated figure, to a standpoint of an entitled customer purchasing a service and, ultimately, a qualification that will guarantee a future income (Archer, 2008; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). Such a culture has a deleterious impact on the very nature of knowing and knowledge, and learning and teaching in universities in two particular ways.

Firstly, the relationship between teachers and students becomes increasingly commodified, with the establishment of a measureable performativity (Ball, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Connell, 2013). As others have argued, the practices of performativity meet resistance from staff who respond with varying levels of compliance (see Archer, 2008; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Collyer, 2015). Understanding the nuances and specifics of such resistance is not easy given that the institutions rather than individuals tend to be the analytical focal point in the literature. This paper contributes by providing some indicative accounts of the pedagogical work of staff, and of the teaching encounter.

Secondly, the neoliberal episteme sold by universities to undergraduate students, becomes a commodity in an economic exchange. In this context, as Naidoo and Williams (2015) argue:

the consuming student seeks out the simplest and most economic way of procuring their degree and in so doing internalises this form of consumer identity [and] places themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of

education who abdicate their own responsibility for learning (p. 216).

Like Connell (2013) and Ball (2012), I take the view that education is inherently transformative, and that a purposeful pedagogy is a key means of challenging the neoliberal episteme and enabling students to engage critically with their worlds (Sheeran et al., 2007). One way of doing this is through the use of inclusive, collaborative, transition pedagogies which facilitate the development of a democratic, dialogic classroom.

The social labour of pedagogy

It would be difficult to find anyone who works in a university, or in government, who disagreed with the fundamental proposition that education generates both social and individual transformation (Action on Access, 2009; Bradley et al., 2008). How this transformation is brought about is less certain.

The term 'pedagogical work' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), is key and neatly conveys both a communication and a power system. Transition pedagogies are an approach to teaching wherein the purpose and actions of the teacher are laid bare to the taught through the unpacking and verbalising of all teaching decisions. It is a strategy where one deliberately models - and openly discusses - one's own pedagogical choices. In terms of communication, the students are invited into the teacher's thought processes and understand the metacognitive reasoning behind the choice of materials, reading or classroom activity. In so doing, the orthodox power dynamics of the classroom are breached since the teacher's intentions are no longer necessarily mysterious, nor is the purpose of the learning activity. The open discussion of learning as a process, and the pedagogical work which takes place to facilitate learning, produces insight into the development

of their own cognition on the part of students. (FitzSimmons, 2015; Freire, 2000).

The next section argues that, even within the contemporary neoliberal university, pedagogical work such as this can be decisively organised to create a collaborative space. Such a space can both facilitate a building of academic capital for students (Naidoo & Williams, 2015), and more democratic teaching moments for staff (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Connell 2013). In this way, the neoliberal episteme is compromised since it can no longer be a commodity just to be bought and sold, but becomes more porous, a construct to be tested, added to and revised.

In order to do this, I draw on Amsler's (2014) typology of pedagogies of possibility which fall into three groups: 'pedagogies of *emergence* and *becoming*; of *encounter* and *discomfort*; and of *sociality* and *community*' (p.281). She argues that these can be compelling tools for building collaboration, and a foil to the individualism of neoliberalism. I offer some pragmatic examples of such pedagogies, followed by the perceptions of staff who have used them.

Context and approach

Whilst much has been written on pedagogy in higher education in the broadest sense, there is a dearth of material which discusses Connell's 'social labour' of teaching (2013, p. 105). The perceptions of academics working full-time or part-time under neoliberalism has been explored very little (see Archer, 2008; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Collyer, 2015). The data discussed below arises from a project conducted in two Australian universities in different states¹. Both universities have a strong commitment to social inclusion and a high percentage of sessional staff. But neither are research-intensive and both are at the lower end of the league tables.

¹ Funding for this project was provided by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching - ID12-2561

One hundred and sixty seven staff in teaching teams from the disciplines of Humanities, Biomedicine, Nursing, Creative Arts, Physiology, Education, Paramedics, Communication and Design were offered a series of workshops on transition pedagogies at the beginning and middle of each semester over the course of two years. Most of these staff had no formal teaching qualifications, were teaching large numbers of first-in-family students and increasingly facing the metrics of retention and success data against which their performance was measured. Interestingly, when asked about their personal history of teaching, most observed that they taught as they had been taught themselves, which is common across the sector (see Fink, 2013).

Participants attended a series of eight, six hour workshops over two years where staff were provided with a suite of transparent, inclusive, collaborative teaching strategies. The pedagogies were modelled, with an explicit articulation of their purpose (and theoretical grounding) which positioned the participants in the liminal space of both student and teacher. The purpose of such a positioning was to develop both awareness of, and sensitivity to, the likely frame of mind of transitioning tertiary students, particularly those arriving from first-in-family backgrounds.

The pedagogies modelled included the following:

- Strategies to build an inclusive, collaborative classroom culture designed both to ensure that students are explicitly introduced to the classroom protocols in tertiary education (Devlin, 2011)
- Staged introductory exercises where students are progressively and purposefully introduced to one another, focusing on their off-campus lives and successes, likes and dislikes, and their future hopes (Allen, 2008; Hughes, 2017).

- Collaborative teaching strategies where students learn to draw on one another's expertise and together work to understand a piece of reading for example, or analyse a social issue (Richardson & Radloff, 2014).
- Discussion-based approaches based on Socratic methodologies which engage participants in a highly-structured, disciplined, inquiry-based dialogue which develop critical thinking, collaboration, critical enquiry and also teach middle-class conventions of verbal exchange (Hughes, 2017; Mitchell, 2006).
- A set of tools which help students to develop academic capital: skills to navigate their way through the knowledge regimes of a university, and an improved suite of skills to help them think, discuss and write (Roberts, 2011).

A purposeful sample of 20 staff was formed with participants from each of the discipline areas, equal numbers from each institution, of each sex and of both permanent and casual status². Hour long semi-structured interviews were conducted which canvassed their use of the pedagogies themselves and more general questions about the ways in which their participation had impacted on their perception of themselves as a teacher. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and a thematic analytic perspective was used to explore their responses (Burman & Parker, 1993).

Of interest here were the ways in which these colleagues encountered these transition pedagogies, and their perception of the efficacy of the pedagogies in terms of building a dialogic classroom which not only had the capacity to promote critical thinking but also might reasonably lead to the exemplar education discussed by Connell (2013) and Ball and Olmedo (2013).

² Ethics approval was granted by both participating universities

Pedagogical Work

Sociality and community

Building a sense of belonging and engagement is one of the most crucial tasks facing academics. Without this, their students are much more likely to leave and much more likely to fail, particularly if they are first-in-family (Allen, 2008; Devlin, 2011). These elusive qualities also create a foundation from which it is possible to create a culture of co-operation and discussion.

A number of pedagogies designed to generate sociality and community were modelled at the start of every session. The pedagogies were designed to create connections between teacher and participants not only through the sharing of similarities and personal qualities but also through building an articulated and agreed upon classroom culture through the use of a collective social contract which expressed the behavioural protocols of the class. In this context, the strength of the relationships between students and staff was viewed as critically important given that the literature is in no doubt that students both desire such relationships (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2010) and, when they have them, are much more likely to persist and increase their levels of academic success (Richardson & Radloff, 2014). For first-in-family students, openly valuing the personal qualities and cultural capital they bring to the classroom, whilst also laying bare the habitus of the university is critical to their sense of belonging (see Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Devlin, 2011; Gale & Mills, 2013; Haggis, 2006; Richardson & Radloff, 2014; Roberts, 2011; Tangalakis, Hughes, Brown, & Dickson, 2014).

When asked about their use of pedagogies which carefully and systematically created a dialogic classroom culture through social labour, the participants made a distinction between the conventional 'icebreaker' and the explicit articulation of the purpose of the

exercise. In this first example, Karen³ offered a snapshot of her own changed understanding and her clear expression of the desired qualities of the class:

I think community building's really been fantastic, I always thought icebreaker, I didn't think community build...Now I actually even tell them why; I say after we've done it, I say why we did it...we talk about opening up, having trust, community where we're talking about creativity and where we're doing creative activities. (Karen, 46, casual, Communication)

David similarly explained to his classes the purpose of creating connection but also crafted an early social contract which made explicit his expectations of them, and clarified their expectations of him. Here the institution's habitus is laid bare in order that students better understand it (see Devlin, 2011; Hughes, 2015; Naidoo & Williams, 2015):

Even community building, I think they understood why we were doing it, I said "I know you've done icebreakers and stuff like that, but let me just..." That's about being explicit about every step, social contracts, I've done that in every workshop now (David, 34, teaching only permanent, Creative Arts)

Josef argued that setting the expectations of the classroom together both empowers students and builds a sense of collaboration and connection very quickly indeed:

...the thing that stands out in my mind that was really powerful for me was that technique on setting class rules, and the expectations you had of one other and stuff...And it was insane, it was absolutely unbelievable how quickly rapport was built, how people were relating to me differently themselves, definitely there was this air of just honesty and connection and mutual support that I don't think I often see until weeks in, once people opened up a bit more,

³ All names used are pseudonyms.

and it was instant from the first class and I thought that was unbelievable...this idea of equalising power, they don't feel like they're separate and down here and you're up here. They feel more empowered, I think they feel more part of the learning process (Josef, 31, sessional, Humanities)

Emergence and becoming

Pedagogies of emergence and becoming rest on the idea that the work of coming to understanding inevitably changes the subject position of the learner. They invite both students and teachers to think about thinking, and to think about learning. The participants were shown how to use pedagogies which encourage students to think metacognitively, and to subsequently be in a position to understand the depth of their own learning, and the ways in which it could be developed.

Inherent in this process is change in both teacher and learner. There is little doubt that, when involved in the planning and negotiation of their learning, students become increasingly engaged which raises the question posed by Roberts (2011) of whether traditionally didactic pedagogies themselves might be instrumental in disengaging students. For these reasons, pedagogies of emergence and becoming were utilised in order to generate a commitment to learning and an understanding of its dynamics. These pedagogies focussed on the co-creation of knowledge, on liberatory practices of dialogue, witnessing and co-operation (Amsler, 2014). These challenged students to reflect and to question, and the teacher here was also changed:

Teaching can have a transformative effect on me when I see that the light bulbs come on for them... most of these students don't believe they've got any right to be at uni, and the way our team works is that we show them very much that they have got the right to be at uni, they've got the right to achieve at uni, and it is a partnership. It's not just them by themselves doing it, it's a

partnership between the teacher and them. (Maria, 42, sessional, Nursing)

An unexpected finding was the expressed pleasure teaching brought to staff – even those who had been employed precariously for many years. Richardson and Radloff (2014) confirm this possibility, arguing that frequent interactions between staff and students both increase the satisfaction levels of staff, and improve the prospects of students actively participating in their learning. This is borne out in the narratives provided here. In the following for example, Naomi describes both her delight in her students' success but, more importantly, in their agency:

I just love interacting with the students, I love it when they discover new things. I really love it when I can sit down with them towards the end of the year and go "Just have a think about how much you've learnt in this time" and now it's even more sort of spine tingling because I can go "Look at how much you've learnt" and they'll go "You taught me that" and I'll go "No I didn't, I taught you how to learn that" which for me is much more engaging and much more powerful. (Naomi, 51, sessional, Humanities)

Encounter and discomfort

Pedagogies of encounter and discomfort are designed to challenge (Amsler, 2014). It is the work of understanding problematic knowledge, of having unsettling encounters with difference, ambiguity and otherness which trigger the beginning of possibility and which, inevitably, transforms the learner (Amsler, 2014; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Connell, 2013). An example of such a pedagogy is the Socratic seminar where students engage in a disciplined, collaborative discussion focused commonly on a contentious question. Similarly, participants were taught to use pedagogies where students are encouraged to use critical thinking to resolve conflicts which arise when presented with alternative perspectives, ideas or contradictions.

In the following, George and Danh argue that they focus on creating a culture of productive confusion:

George: So what I try and achieve, there is one goal that I do have which is cognitive dissonance. And if you get people off balance intellectually then you've got them because of their thinking (61, sessional, university preparation course).

Danh: The first thing I tell them is that I'm here to ask you a question, to get you confused. If you're not confused you're not doing your work! (34, 50/50 casual & permanent, Design)

Maria suggests that discomfort arises in students simply because the explicit nature of the pedagogies challenges their expectation that knowledge will be delivered to them as a consumable:

Once we start teaching in a different format, students can feel really uncomfortable, because they think 'I just want you to tell me what I need to know', rather than, 'We want you to identify what you don't know and then go and learn it' (42, sessional, Nursing).

Finally, when asked about the power dynamic created by explicit pedagogies, David argues that it is the process of learning that matters, and that using pedagogies designed to disrupt positively adjusts the traditional relationship of student dependence:

In terms of what happens in the classes, I think it just opens it up, allows the students in, so it's not this war between, not even you and them, between knowledge and them. It's like we're here to teach them and help them to learn and that's not just about the content, it's about the process of that. So how can you teach that without being explicit? And the cost is what? That as a teacher you somehow lose your power or control over the class? Well I think if that's a problem for you, maybe it's a deeper problem than just being explicit about how you're teaching (37, permanent, Creative Arts).

Conclusion

Is it possible to stand aside from the discursive imperatives generated by neoliberalism and its practices in the academy? On one level, of course it is not, since all academics are subject to the managerialism and metrics which both shape academic lives and predict academic futures in new ways.

But, as Archer (2008) argues when discussing neoliberal subjectivities and identities, it is possible to be part of a neoliberal university, yet not be a neoliberal subject, through a recognition of its technicalities, an observation of its imperatives and a variety of means of withstanding its logic and its standpoint (p. 276).

It is possible to work with students to create transformative classroom cultures which facilitate their engagement with learning, their sense of themselves as accomplished scholars and to put in place the beginnings of a critical engagement with their world which challenges the reasoning of neoliberalism. After all, it is neither new nor innovative to suggest that higher education can, and should, help students become intellectually critical and autonomous (Amsler, 2014; Canaan, 2005; Tapp, 2014). The very act of teaching itself is a practice based on the promise of hope and of transformation.

The demand for improved student evaluations and reduced attrition in massified universities can generate a desire for the production of classroom cultures which are more dynamic, and which create high levels of student engagement (Richardson & Radloff, 2014). I am not suggesting that the pedagogical culture be one of artifices, or less scholarly, but that in an era of constraint and measurement, Connell's (2013) conception of pedagogical work as social labour can be used to purposefully disrupt and transgress conventional classroom power relations and, ultimately, enable students from every background to critically read their world, and to become successful lifelong learners.

The perceptions of teaching staff experienced in the purposeful use of transparent, dialogic pedagogies indicate that they do, indeed, make a contribution to the engagement of first-in-family students and to the building of their 'academic capital' in the broadest sense (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Furthermore, they appear to play a role in enriching the encounter between staff and students and in so doing, they might offer a buffer to neoliberal discourses about education which solely centre on human capital formation.

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