Formations of Difference in Higher Education Pedagogies (0228)

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In this paper, I will present an analysis of the ways neoliberalism works at the micro-level of pedagogical subjectivities, implicating academics and students in regulatory and disciplinary technologies of the self. Within neoliberalized higher education, discourses of 'teaching excellence' have become taken-for-granted, couched in the language of the market with a preoccupation on student engagement and league tables. The notion of 'diversity' has been embraced, often as a marketing tool, ignoring the ways that diversity is intertwined with difference and 'misrecognition'. Difference tends to be reduced to the marketing images of happy university students from 'Other' kinds of backgrounds. Diversity is often constructed as unproblematic and desirable, whilst difference is to be controlled through standardization and quality assurance.

HE policy emphasizes the imperative to develop human capital to create competitive knowledge economies and employable individuals. Market mechanisms such as league tables are used to 'exert pressure on universities to comply with consumer demand' (Naidoo 2003: 250). Pedagogies in higher education are reduced to the language of the market, including 'delivery', 'style' and 'efficiency' and to notions of consumer demand and satisfaction in what becomes an educational package 'delivered' by universities competing in the business of higher education. Discourses of flexibility have also emerged, which point to the development of flexible provision to address a diversified market. Although flexibility is important in addressing diversity in HE, the particular neoliberal discourse of flexibility individualizes the perfomative to 'be flexible', with academics demonstrating their value in terms of juggling research, teaching and administration in the context of intensified workloads and expectations and students often juggling full-time study with unpaid and paid work outside of university. This is tied in with discourses of employability, excellence and resilience and has profound effects on identity-formation, including what it might mean to be an academic and a student in the Twenty-first Century University. With decreasing and constrained budgets in the age of austerity, this means doing more with less resources, and there is pressure through target-setting frameworks to continually demonstrate individual value for money in an increasingly competitive and narrowly-framed financialized context. Furthermore, recognition of the legitimate academic/student subject is formed under the gaze of technologies of classification tied in with assessment, grading, league tables, surveys and evaluations. Discourses of excellence are circulated to produce dividing practices (Foucault, 1977), where pedagogic spaces form a panopticon and bodies are made visible through dividing practices.

Neoliberalism frames academic spaces, concealing the ways that pedagogical encounters form subjectivities, ways of being and doing. Sara Ahmed's (2004) work helps to consider how the emotional shapes such processes – the ways

that the emotional works on and marks out different bodies. Ahmed argues that emotions 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects'. Pedagogies are formed through classed, gendered and racialized subjectivities, intimately bound up with historical ways of being a teacher or a student in higher education. Neoliberal imperatives emphasize techno-rationalist discourses of human capital and individual responsibility. Characteristics associated with difference in HE, such as 'being emotional', are regulated and controlled through a range of disciplinary technologies. Pedagogical relations are thus deeply implicated in the classed, gendered and racialized politics of (mis)recognition, and profoundly connected to the impact of the emotional on the body and the self (Ahmed, 2004).

Nancy Fraser's (1997) notion of 'misrecognition' sheds light on the ways that institutionalized cultural value patterns have discriminatory and exclusionary effects on the differential and unequal positioning of persons. By locating misrecognition at the level of the institution, Fraser develops an 'objectivist' perspective of recognition. This perspective enables concrete strategies that are aimed at dismantling institutionalized forms of discrimination and exclusion. However, as Lois McNay argues (2008: 148), this does not address the lived and emotional dimensions of experiences of misrecognition. The ways that academics and students are differentiated and live out those differentiations through practice and experience is embodied and internalized as forms of symbolic violence, yet often perceived as about differences in (innate) potential and ability. The concept of embodied identities emphasizes the working of power and difference and the ways that these are marked and inscribed on the body, as well as resisted or subverted through what Foucault calls 'practices of the self'.

In order to make sense of these theoretical arguments, I will present an analysis of data from my recent research funded by the Higher Education Academy. Drawing on in-depth interviews with senior academics, lecturers and students across different higher education institutions in England, my analysis will highlight that pedagogical spaces are complex and ridden with contradictions that academics and students are compelled to decode and negotiate in the process of staking out a claim as a legitimate and valued subject. However, this is particularly precarious in contemporary contexts of austerity, competition, stratification and performativity, in which becoming recognized as having 'value' is framed by neoliberal imperatives but also intimately bound up with social and cultural inequalities and the politics of (mis)recognition. I will conclude by exploring the implications of the analysis for teaching in higher education that addresses difference and challenges complex inequalities in pedagogical spaces.

References

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