Staff student relationships in a climate of insecurity: new bargains and new boundaries

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Introduction

This paper is arguing that some fundamental needs of student staff relationships in the university have remained consistent but the capacity for them to be met within higher education has changed, as society, and the university as one instantiation of society – late consumer capitalist society- has changed.

The context of this paper is working in higher education for 25years, mostly on a professional social work degree. The kinds of students we recruit represent 2 distinct populations: post 18 students with good academic qualifications and a small amount of experience- e.g. volunteer experience, in social work, many of whom in UK tradition have left home to come to university. And older students e.g. from access to education courses, many of whom have families, some of whom have a great deal of pre-professional social work experience, and usually living locally (and of course there are those in between). The balance has changed – which I will return to.

This is a psychosocial paper. I look at the consumer capitalist context of late modern society which impacts on all institutions and all relationships through marketisation and individualisation, and then focus this specifically on universities and the programmes they can offer.

Then I go on to consider some of the psychic needs of students, many of which are relatively unchanging, and demonstrate that in various ways these new university 'businesses' are less able to meet them

I focus briefly on the staff and how the institutional damage caused by marketisation to their work and working context makes them less able to respond helpfully to students – to hold them in mind, e.g.

I summarise by arguing that really the new marketised university struggles to offer the kinds of holding and creative environments best suited to student education, and that therefore in a marketised context the relationships between students and staff are impoverished and damaged

 Finally I try to think through a working model of engagement with the students that might offer a better basis for suggesting that Honneth's model of recognition can offer a pattern for developing better levels of well-being – friends and groups, involvement as a stakeholder, change to be valued by a community of esteem?]

The Context

That late consumer capitalism produces insecure identities, brittle and subject to flux, revisable and unstable, subject to ontological insecurity has been argued convincingly for a generation. (Giddens, 1991; Frosh, 1991). That this is particularly so of young people 'moving towards the future without a map' has also been demonstrated (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006).

Gradually but inevitably, that the impact of mass marketisation of society means all the institutions of society is being understood. For example families (Ciscel and Heath 2001), relationships –(Elliott and Lemert, 2009) health care (Pollock, 2005) and education (Collini, 2013) .

That higher education is also being marketised, then, should come as no shock, though it does. The marketisation of the English University system over the last 5 years has brought into sharp focus for many commentators issue of the value, worth, cost and accessibility of higher education: in the UK for many years previous to this understood as a public service/personal right- even though a very flawed one as a mechanism for social justice. That the juggernaut of consumer capitalism can crush education under its wheels is for many of us working in the sector, devastating. In the UK the institution of the £9,000 fee is simply the tip of the iceberg. The designation of 24 Universities (the Russell group) as the elite UK university sector (hence the rest cast as 2nd or 3rd rate), the research assessment exercise whereby funding is allocated on research 'excellence', the fierce competition which can lead to more being spent in universities on marketing than on education etc- a whole range of changes produces an insidious marketisation in all parts of

the university and I am arguing impacts negatively on the individual student and the student body as a whole.

Entry to HE: choices and changes

Similarly to other key UK institutions such as the health service, the neo-liberal 'bargain' has at its heart the notion of consumer choice of the 'service' they would like. And as critics have convincingly argued, in reality choice is a myth when not all options are open to everyone Choice in education is classed and gendered, which is not new, but is bought into stark relief by the inappropriate rhetoric occluding this.

Students and their parents are forced into positions of instrumentality as 'choice' involves the conflating of market decisions with educational decisions. It invariably produces increased anxieties. It suggests a level of control in reality not mostly available, and as always with delusions of choice then failure to achieve is likely to be experienced as self-blame not criticism of loaded systems.

The UK Russell group demarcation as mentioned above designates only 24 top universities (out of app 160). A considerable amount of snobbery however already existed in the system prior to league tables and elite groups. Middle class parents, schoolteachers of 16-18 year olds, young people, the media: all understand the implications. I will return to this point below. As has been discussed in relation to school 'choice', the psychic investments in 'good' and 'bad' educational establishments: the identifications, fantasies/failures are extreme. 'Where will I go to university?' Is hugely invested in.

The entrance qualifications that universities demand have become more standardised. For example even social work programmes have become increasingly subject to standardisation: the institutional response to the universities vastly increasing size is invariably more standardisation- its own anxieties about being lost translated into bureaucratic form. We no longer apply our own entry criteria on the course but have to abide by the UCAS points system, though we can also rate experience in social work as part of this. The outcome over the years is that there are more 'traditional' young well-qualified students, fewer mature students, fewer male students, fewer students from disadvantaged groups, and no graduates. The course then has suffered a loss of richness and diversity in its population, and seems to undervalue experience in knowledge development. In

ordinary ways seminar groups are impoverished, with less peer learning, less diverse experience shared, etc. It positions the staff member frequently as the only source of knowledge: an unhealthy arrangement for psychic and social reasons.

Generally in the university sector, the reliance on UCAS points (usually meaning high standards of pre-university exam passes) push us towards more academic achievers at the cost of all other criteria: there is less risk taking, less valuing of any other kinds of experience.

Also significant is that for most institutions the staff teaching hours/ student ratio is worse. Bigger groups do not necessary facilitate the safest environments, e.g. they may not be so safe for reflective discussions.

Students

Thinking then about the student – the consumer as now addressed in HE- I would argue that many of their affective needs and psychic vulnerabilities have remained consistent over years but that the context of the new university business is less able to support them.

Starting university in the UK has mostly been a point of transition, indeed fracture, in the lives of most young people who leave home and move town to study. The culture, for a series of historic reasons, has been thus, and despite predictions, the fees system seems to have made little difference. High levels of anxiety provoked by the complete unknown, the disconnection from relationships (and the pressure to find new ones) the identity struggles precipitated by this, the loneliness, lost-ness - without even thinking about learning - are an almost uniquely psychically threatening situation.

Isca Salzberger-Wittenburg's (et al) seminal work from the 1980s still is I think the best psychoanalytically oriented 'take' on the processes at work under the surface of the relationships between student, staff and institution. This is, I am sure, material you probably are familiar with, so I just want to mention a small number of key points, and how I think the 'new bargain' – the marketisation of the education sector, detrimentally impacts on this.

Revisiting, then, the point made above about choice, choosing and not choosing a university, Salzberger-Wittenburg's analysis adds a further dimension to understanding this as intensely problematic in

this market led context. She considers the feeling of 'why have I been chosen' and the guilt about getting there when others haven't, and anxiety about the capacity to fulfil that promise. She also argues that if the institution is seen as 2nd 3rd rate, there may be an unconscious denigration of peers who are also 'the rejects', the inferior like ones self. This might lead to damaging feelings of hatred against fellow students and hatred against the institution (ibid). As well as esteem damage this of course will impact on how education itself is perceived – what it is seen as worth. So then the Russell group/ 'others' split, which blatantly and publically states 'elite' v the rest, has bought this into sharp and public focus in the new marketised universities. The almost hysterical scramble for grades etc. for university entry hypes up the chosen and not-chosen elements for at least 2 years before arrival –investing the actual commencement of university with impossible levels of expectation/desire.

Size and space

Salzberger-Wittenberg looks at the fears of being a new student/pupil. In object relations terms, she discusses how internal/baby states are reactivated by change, and the loss of the old and the excitements and fears of the new. She is conscious of the power of the material to evoke the psychic: for example being lost in unknown physical spaces or surrounded by strangers. She argues that the bigger the unknown space and the greater the number of strangers the more frightened people feel. (1992) This is a principle educationalists have show some awareness of over time, e.g. in nursery 'corners', etc.

But Universities have become huge entities. 100 UK universities have more than 10,000 students. UWE, my university, has 25,000 students (we say. There are 30,000 listed in league tables) 21,000 of whom are full time. 14,000 are under 21 years old. The newly built student 'village' houses 2,000 students (my village had 400 or so!)

 Interestingly there are 1,400 lecturers (1 for about every 18 students) and - worsening staff ratios leading to e.g. bigger seminar

Relationships

Space is relational in Salzberger-Wittenberg's work, and psychic as well as physical: She speaks not only of spatial boundaries, but also of the security of

'being held within the span of some reliable person's watchful eyes…To be held in someone's attention, once mothers, now teachers…provides us not only with some feeling of being safely watched, but at a deeper level also means to be thought about, known as a person. In this way we feel reassured that we exist as a separate, knowable entity' (ibid p10).

I am not sure lecturers and tutors work in conditions conducive to holding students in mind – a point I will return to below.

Salzberger-Wittenberg's work is particularly helpful for thinking about relationships - for example she points out that 'any new relationship tends to arouse hope and dread and these exist side by side in our minds' (ibid, p10). By addressing the student/staff relationship in the language of the effective, rather than the rational, she is able to explore, e.g. not only our material hopes of being helped and not judged harshly, but also how it is people on whom we are to some extent dependent (like staff) that we particularly invest with not only childhood wishes and anxieties but a great deal of power, for the good and bad. So then the rational discourses of the consumer/market bargain are not adequate for understanding here.

The relationship and learning

What students project onto staff of course is not simply about longing, liking, loving etc. but is crucial for understanding learning. Her argument is thus: 'in all of us there is a child part longing for the lost paradise of pre-natal existence and infancy in which needs are instantly met, (or so we like to imagine)'. In students these unconscious baby to mother desires are rekindled by the dependency relationship. She argues that this can lead to expectations/fantasies of all nurturing staff (or withholding staff) and passive students waiting to be fed.

Salzberger-Wittenberg sees two major kinds of problems here with such passive states. The first is that passivity is not at all conducive to learning. She comments that

'insistence on an easy way of obtaining knowledge and experience is a very serious hindrance to real learning and development' (ibid, p28)

She points out that what is really unhelpful is the idea that learning or whatever can be provided without being struggled for. I would argue that some of education in the marketised university precisely falls into the trap of 'spoon-feeding' education. Variously worried academics have queried whether as an institution we are guilty of offering education as entertainment, of grade inflation, and so on. I also wonder if there any implications also some implications here about expectations of the good/bad universities, or expectations of what has been 'bought' with the nine thousand pound fees? That it will be 'handed over' like any other bought product? Is there more resentment possible, more fantasies of entitlement and withholding?

Hunt and Linden also consider what the psychic and material conditions are for learning in HE. They draw on Winnicott's work on transitional spaces, to talk about ' the importance of an intermediate transitional space in creativity and learning; a space between dreaming and reality, self and other, me and not quite me. Such imaginative and emotional possibilities are there in adult learning… (2006, p15). But are they now? How can that still be possible in a climate of instrumentality and mechanistic learning? Students have been lead by the education system and by consumer capitalism in risk societies to be extremely outcome oriented in their educations, to go for hard results not dreaming, play, creativity and so on.

Secondly, Salzberger-Wittenberg considers anger and rejection in the relationship. She suggests that lecturers like other helping professions

'easily become objects of infantile hopes: someone who will magically cure pain, take away frustration, helplessness and despair and instead provide happiness and fulfilment of all desires. We must expect that a person who holds on to the belief that such desires should and can be met will easily feel disappointed, will easily turn away from us in anger, blame us for being totally unhelpful and seek out someone who is more likely to comply with his wishes' (ibid, p28).

This I would argue is even more the case when there is a financial bargain embedded in the relationship: I paid 9,000 for this and it/you are rubbish!

Impact on the staff

Thinking about staff in relation to this last point then in the contemporary world of the National Student Survey (NSS) and complaint culture, this will have far reaching consequences? There are more formal complaints, staff are less supported and feel more vulnerable – we are all 'single parents' now and boundaries are harder to set: another change.

For many staff the whole institutional system in HE has come to marginalise the activities of thinking and understanding, reflecting and dreaming, as the demands of research trump those of teaching. We experience a considerable degree of 'alienation from our work, when accounting for it in managerial terms takes up more time than scholarly activity'. (Collini, 2013, online)

How then can we successfully maintain our capacity to hold our students in our minds? Even our capacity as subject teachers is likely to be impaired.

Different kinds of relationships and expectations, some perhaps connected to expectations generated by the media might impact on teachers sense of their identity and esteem. There are new demands, or fears of new demands: Must I be more entertaining? Do I need more pictures? Is there some kind of personality cults: will I be liked? What are they saying about me on face book? How will I get top NSS scores? What's in my annual appraisal? Do we ever dare to set boundaries? Late? Forgot? Didn't do it? Don't worry - any thing you want dear! What is the message, for example, that the latter really conveys?

 "You can do whatever you want, I don't care." This indifference is almost worse than a conflict. It is like saying, "You don't exist for me." (Venisdendael- 2011- online interview)

What, of our own alienation in this world, where it is so easy feel ones commitment and skills as a teaching academic are unvalued, do we mirror to our students

Friendship groups

Perhaps it is worth just giving a little thought to the issue of maybe students are actually fine, because, whether adults/parents/staff are able to accept this, young people gain far more nurture and

substance from friends and peers: - they don't need us! However even if this were the case, I would argue, consumer capitalism and the marketised university make this kind of nurturance problematic.

Finding friends on immediate arrival at university has probably always been considered of immense importance – quick – find someone to be my friend. And sometimes that works. But given the commoditisation of relationships in later modernity, the thesis would argue that these instrumental friendships can be fragile and differentially available. Does everyone get included? Is only the attractive and cool: those with the cultural capital. How ends up lonely?

University fresher's weeks, for example, seem to be as much about the pressure to fit in as having a great time. They may have unfamiliar or high levels of risk, cost money the student doesn't have or is worried about, be cultural estranging/exclusive and raise a whole range of identity concerns. Erikson's 16-18 life stage: Identity v identity diffusion, may be apt.

On an affective level peers may be rivals as well as supports, e.g. in classes. Saltzberger-Wittenberg points out that although the group can share experiences, be confided in etc. it also might, like older siblings, see one as a 'silly baby', may seem far more secure and may be rivals for attention and praise (1992, p13). Speaking can be dangerous: perhaps you will get it wrong and the others will know you have it wrong: they may see you as ridiculous, stupid, and a failure.

Friendships then can be sustaining but also, especially in the closed worlds of that 'total institution' that most campus universities in UK frightening and certainly always complex under the surface. There are shifting and ambivalent thoughts feelings and emotions that the notion of friendship might encompass-

'friendships can give rise to negative emotions such as anger, competition, guilt…they can be experienced very intensely, cause great distress and be difficult to confront. Both close friendships and work collaborations can be disrupted or even destroyed by them…. when friendship spans both 'public' and 'private' … the risks may be greater' (Andrew and Montague, 1998, p356)

Conclusion

I have not even begun to discuss how class differences and/or being a mature student heightens some of the struggles pin-pointed here. The increased anxiety around lack of a sense of entitlement, often humiliating/shaming past experiences of learning, real financial pressures and also huge achievement anxiety (you can't fail – not if it's life-long debt at stake) exacerbates the tensions.

HE in the UK (everwhere?) has always been really important in relation to the ongoing project of the self: the capacity for change and development through the education system as a formal and informal educator. Education clearly is an important tool of re-invention of self – even if this must be inevitably ontologically insecure (Giddens, 1991) Particularly for 'mature' students' there will be substantial identity investment and fears of changing and not changing.

As I have argued, universities now may be even more insecure for everyone. Even though Individualisation means friendships are temporary and instrumental. Pressures are on for great grades; courses are assessment led. There is no time to play, to be creative, to think or reflect. Staff student relations are still permeated with the enduring needs for relationships and recognition and for containment. However the context of marketisation I have suggested limits the staff's capacity to respond to them. Is the university – the course- a 'good enough holding environment' in the Winnicottian sense? I would argue that the new economic arrangements: the new bargain – make this extremely unlikely.

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END

[Moving forward-optional section]

Models of human well-being are not hard to come by and thinking about how best one can offer students some form of nurture that is sustaining without rendering them passive, inclusive without being overwhelming, and which allows them to be children and adults has various traditions and disciplines from which to draw.

As with the analysis above, my own preference is for models which allow psychosocial understandings, and can consider the relational and material needs of learners. Axel Honneth's work on 'recognition' seems helpful for considering dimensions of student well-being and how to support them.

Honneth argues that recognition can usefully understood as having 3 manifestations, and people need to have access to recognition in all of these ways. Firstly they need opportunities to 'be well with others', to have relationships, to have affection and caring, love, even, friendships. Courses cannot make this happen but can structure induction periods to facilitate this, and use opportunities to encourage this. Our politics courses have regular evening quiz nights, a Christmas do, informal evening seminars with a drink – and so on. Being held in the mind of another seems to me to be very much part of individual recognition. Staff can reflect back a worthwhile, significant lovable person.

Secondly people need opportunities to gain self-respect in the eyes of the state: To have a stake – to have some kind of 'vote' or say matters. How can we make our students connect up to the system? What opportunities are there for student counsels, faculty boards, being representatives, fund-raising for causes etc? Do we prod students in those directions?

The third form of recognition is the need for self-esteem, recognition of the individual's qualities amongst the person's 'communities of value' to which they belong. Esteem is linked both to the person's esteem within the group to which they belong and also the value of the 'group' to the society as a whole. In the UK we have never been very good at holding students up as a community of value, tending to see them indulgently as big irresponsible children or occasionally seeing them as trouble. However it is maybe possible to think about how courses and curricula could be better organized to allow people a sense of individual qualities being important to the group, of ways of gaining esteem.]

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