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Narratives of care amongst undergraduate students (accepted 24th July 2017)

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Abstract

This paper addresses a central paradox that affects the nature of the student experience in the UK. On the one hand, the marketisation of higher education, with its associated emphasis on performativity indicators, may be seen to have reduced students to numbers, with the attendant consequence that the affective domain of studying and learning has been lost. On the other hand, there is more attention given to student feelings than was ever the case in the past and questions about student satisfaction have become more prominent. This paper will explore this paradox using empirical data gathered from a longitudinal study of 'non-traditional' students at one ancient university in Scotland. We indicate the ways in which the tension between the technicist spaces of the neo-liberal university and its empathetic, caring spaces are mediated by students as they make their way through their degrees. We argue that caring relationships with staff are of central importance to students' well-being and success at university, and that students actively seek to construct support when and where they need it.

Key words

Introduction

This paper explores a topic that is central to the student experience, that is, students' experiences of care in higher education. We will argue that there is a paradox here: just as universities have increasingly adopted the language and behaviours of neo-liberal managerialism and 'student satisfaction' has become the by-word for good practice, so their capacity to respond to students' needs and circumstances in a caring way may be diminished. The government-funded National Student Survey (NSS), which is now open to all final year students at publicly-funded higher education institutions in the UK, asks students to record their satisfaction with a number of key aspects of student experience, including their views about assessment and feedback processes, academic support, the learning community etc. While all these are important and the students' opinions are hugely valuable, it is undoubtedly the case that the NSS has become a stick that is used to beat departments and universities, as some things are measurable (such as the return-time for essays) and others cannot be (for example, how students feel looking back on their learning experiences). In this paper, we begin by reviewing the literature on the impact of the neo-liberal context on higher education in general and then consider the ways in which the audit culture that it generates may have an effect on relationships of care between staff and students. We then use empirical data gathered from a longitudinal study of students at one ancient university in Scotland to illuminate these issues.

All the students who took part in our study had Higher National qualifications from the further education sector. These entry qualifications were considered 'non-traditional' by this university because it was very selective and very few students entered without the standard qualifications of Scottish 'Highers' or English 'A' Levels. This group of students was also unusual in the case-study institution because most of them were of mature age. Because of these unusual characteristics, they were students whom we might anticipate would have shared experiences as students who were 'different' from their contemporaries. In practice, the accounts that they shared with us were multi-layered and very varied. Our focus in this paper is therefore on the difference that good relationships with staff can make to the student experience and the ways in which students navigate the complex landscape of support available to them.

The neoliberal context

The changing landscape of Higher Education, following the rise of neo-liberal politics, has been well-documented (e.g. Hill & Kumar, 2012; Lynch, 2006). Primarily highlighted is the organisational context of 'new managerialism' that includes implementing techniques such as the use of internal cost centres, the fostering of competition between employees, the marketisation of public sector services and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances (Deem, 1998; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Lynch, 2014). Although the purpose of such techniques is most often expressed as improvement, they are, nevertheless, used primarily to monitor accountability and compliance (Harvey & Newton, 2004). They are also intended to encourage competition, because this is seen to represent improved quality within neo-liberalism (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Lynch (2014, 2006) argues that first order values and morals of

trust, integrity and solidarity are thus reduced to second order principles of regulation, control and competition, undermining the very values and function of higher education organisations. The position of these organisations becomes one of market product and resource, where competition for external research funding and for purchase by the 'consumer' student is high, and heavily influenced by the institution's outcome or output measurements (Burrows, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Although the changes in the higher education landscape are by no means uniform across cultures and nations, what appears ubiquitous is the use of a wealth of metrics to measure performativity in academic life (Kelly & Burrows, 2011; Lynch, 2015; Taylor, 2001). These metrics are centred on what is important for market considerations and what is accessible to measure, which does not necessarily reflect the core values of the work, that is, the quality of the teaching, inclusion and relationships (Lynch, 2006). The NSS should be viewed as just one – albeit very powerful - demonstration of the reality of this development in practice.

Neo-liberalism in higher education is not only about attempting to measure <u>how</u> things are done; it also impacts on <u>what</u> is done. Lynch (2006, 2014) asserts that the reduction of individuals to economic actors removes the importance of relationships in learning, and leads to an organisational culture of egocentrism and a decreasing sense of responsibility to others, particularly students. This is particularly evident in the substantial change in the division of labour between research and teaching, where the former is related to more rewards, while the latter is valued much less highly because, as Slaughter and Leslie (2001: 154) argue, academics are increasingly expected to act like educational entrepreneurs. Staff have to generate external research funding and other income for the university and this leads to promotion and academic rewards whereas teaching is much less likely to be validated in this way so, in this neo-liberal context, less time is given to the needs of students.

Staff and relationships of care

Many commentators have argued that this audit culture impacts on staff and student relationships, especially where the performativity demanded by the neo-liberal system means that staff are unable to give sufficient attention to student support (e.g. Burrows, 2012; Spooner, 2015). The neo-liberal emphasis on individual responsibility also downgrades the affective dimensions of teaching and learning (Cree et al, 2016). This is because a focus on individual responsibility means that care is only valued if it is professionalised. This means that, as Lynch (2010, 63) points out, 'top-level positions within higher education are substantively if not formally defined as care-less positions' and so to be a successful academic means that one should be 'unencumbered by caring' (ibid.). Yet research shows that students' academic self-esteem is developed through personal contact with academic tutors and social support from peers (Boler, 1999; Leathwood & Hey, 2009). It is also argued that success in higher education is heavily dependent on students achieving social and academic integration into the institution (e.g. Briggs et al. 2012), although as Kate Thomas (2015) points out, 'the discourse of "belonging" is shaped by a narrow student profile' (p. 38) that assumes that students are young, full time and live on campus. So students that do not conform to this profile are unlikely to find integration easy. In addition, research (Christie et al. 2016: 488) has shown that belonging is a process of on-going change that takes place in interaction between the student and the university environment and so

is a dynamic, mutually constitutive, process where the terms of engagement are not fixed.

The literature also demonstrates the importance of the affective dimension of learning on students' engagement. This is based on the argument that learning is a subjective experience that is bound up with other life events and experiences and is influenced by the opportunities that a student has access to, their perception of self and how they envisage what it might be possible to achieve (Barnett, 2009; Christie et al., 2008). Learning is socially situated and so students' dispositions and qualities both constitute, and are constituted, by their university experiences. This means that it is important to open up the emotional dimensions of learning to scrutiny as a central aspect of the student experience.

Mariskind, (2014:318) has pointed out that organisational structures and institutional cultures 'shape who gives and who receives care, and how that care is valued …and enacted'. In many universities, the support that is offered to students is often reactive in nature; students are expected to identify their own problems and find the right ways of asking for help (Quinlan, 2016). However, as O'Brien (2010: 114) argues, making a difference to students' learning means that staff 'must make sure that students know we care about them' by being more proactive in providing opportunities for students of varying abilities and interests to access the help that they need.

Research has also shown that the people whom students turn to for care and support are usually those that they see most often; the corollary is that they are less likely to seek out people they see as remote and unconnected with them and their learning (Briggs et al, 2012; Solomon, 2007). This leads to the inevitable reality that it is often the designated support staff (administrative staff, library staff and computing staff) that are given a special 'thank-you' at the beginning of students' dissertations and theses, not their academic mentors. But students do need and want 'expert' academic guidance too. Walsh and colleagues point out that students 'perceive [academic tutors] to have a deeper understanding of the student experience than other support providers at the university', and they expect personal guidance to be a part of this (2009: 418).

But not all academics see themselves as having pastoral responsibilities for their students; moreover, university systems (such as 'office hours' where students compete for an academic's time) may mitigate against the fulfilment of such duties. This may, Walsh and colleagues argue, 'lead to tensions and resentment between both students and academics which may lead to negative student outcomes' (ibid. 419). Moreover, research has found that some institutions assume that students will be both self-motivated and sufficiently perceptive to recognise their needs and seek help when they need it. The result is that care often goes proportionally to the 'more articulate and assertive, whose needs are often less than those of the poor and disempowered' (Johnston, & Simpson, 2006: 35). There are, of course, other reasons why tensions and resentment may be a feature of student-academic relationships. O'Brien (2010), Quinlan (2016) and others have pointed out that having the power to assess students can compromise a caring relationship, especially when the outcome is disappointing to the student. The student then may 'no longer want to be in relation with [the staff member] and no longer see […] themselves as the one cared for' (O'Brien, 2010: 113).

Methodology

In order to ascertain how far the findings from the research literature might be demonstrated in practice in one university, we draw on data from a longitudinal study carried out between 2004 and 2015. The aim of the original study had been to track the experiences of a cohort of new, 'non-traditional' entrants with Higher National qualifications who had come to this, ancient, research-intensive university from further education colleges as part of a widening participation initiative. The study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and standardised surveys with students, conducted at key points during their academic journeys. The research began in 2004 when the cohort started their degree programmes, and a total sample of 45 students was recruited. The students were subsequently interviewed at the beginning of the academic year and then on four more occasions throughout their studies and again a year after graduation. The themes covered at each data-collection point remained the same throughout, allowing us to map both individual students' experiences over time and also make comparisons across the whole study. The focus each time was on students' experiences of their academic and personal transitions. As part of this, students were asked about the teaching and learning environments; assessment and feedback practices; relationships with peers and staff; work-life balance; and perceptions about university.

Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed, and was coded using the qualitative data tool NUD·IST. Our analysis employed the constant comparative method (Braun and Clarke 2006). To do this, we first identified themes from the literature and then set out to find instances of these in the interview transcripts, paying attention to new themes that arose, and that were important to the cohort as a whole. This means that in the analysis, each data-item was given equal attention in the coding process; themes were checked against each other and back to the literature. This method of analysis has the advantage of giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables.

In 2015, we attempted, through alumni registers, to contact the cohort 10 years after they had started their studies. Of the 16 we identified, 15 were willing to be interviewed. During this final interview, we invited participants to reflect back on their whole experience of university and any impact that their studies had had on their subsequent personal and professional lives. Of course, expecting respondents to look back on their studies after such a length of time required sensitivity to the possibility of recall bias, which represents a threat to the internal validity of studies using self-reported data (Hassan 2005). We could not prevent this, but we could plan for it, and we did so, firstly, by giving respondents a copy of the questions in advance to help with their recall, and secondly, by reviewing our original data-set and checking that what was said in the retrospective interview was consistent with what had been said during the earlier interviews. Interestingly, the retrospective interviews threw up very different impressions of the university experience overall, suggesting that this group of 15 was probably fairly representative of the range of experiences (good and not-so-good) of the full sample.

In this paper, we present what students told us about the impact of their relationships with staff on their emotional selves, selecting data from three of the data-collection points: namely 3 (beginning of second year of studies), 5 (beginning of fourth year) and 7 (the retrospective interview). We have chosen to provide a 'thick' description of these interviews

that goes beyond surface experiences so that we are capturing the thoughts and feelings of the students as well as the context under which their understandings developed. In presenting our findings in this way, we hope to create 'a sense of verisimilitude, wherein our readers can cognitively and emotively "place" themselves within the research context' (Ponterotto, 2006: 543).

Experiences of staff-student relationships: distance versus connection

As we have outlined in the literature review above, the neo-liberal turn in higher education is credited with reducing relationships with students to economic transactions based on performativity measures, and with prioritising research over teaching. In this scenario, where there is decreased emphasis on teaching and on students, the affective dimensions of learning are subject to particular scrutiny. A common perception amongst the students in our study was that they were only one part of the wider array of responsibilities held by the staff, and that they were not their top priority. The students had internalised the language of performativity including pressures on staff time and judgements about the relative value of engaging with students. Candidate 2 (a 19-year old, white male student studying Social Policy & Sociology) expressed his belief that teaching and students were less important than research:

> 'I got the feeling sometimes that some tutors/lecturers were there to be academics and they were less interested in teaching – they were more – in their papers and stuff. Which is maybe me judging them or whatever, but I definitely thought that sometimes some of the lecturers could be so much better and engage with the students' (Interview 5).

Students undertaking programmes with a high number of entrants felt this keenly. For example, Candidate 30 (an 18 year-old, white female Primary Education student) said:

> 'I have always felt like at University it has been quite a distant relationship you have got with your tutor, your lecturer. You are just seen as one of a number basically' (Interview 5).

Students too were conscious of the pressures on staff time and of how low they often were on the priority list. Candidate 40 was a 36-year old, white student undertaking a degree in Childhood Studies. She spoke about how her Director of Studies:

> '… lovely guy' [but was] 'never really readily available […] because he was so stretched. He was never really around when there were problems' (Interview 5).

Internalising the neo-liberal discourse about the demands on staff time sometimes meant that students were scared to ask academics for help. They felt either that the staff could not help, or that they had set them on an untouchable pedestal, divorced from the everyday realities of the students' learning careers. Candidate 30 commented:

> 'So I was scared in a way, if I went up and asked, they would turn round and say well I can't do anything about it really' (Interview 3).

While Candidate 40 opined: 'Actually the calibre of the lecturers is a bit scary' (Interview 3).

Often developing a positive relationship with staff was attributed to good luck, indicating that this was counter to the normal expectation that staff would be remote and not especially interested in, or supportive of, the students. Candidate 24, a 37 year-old white student undertaking a Childhood Studies degree, felt that her favourable experience was again a lucky chance that came down to the fact that:

> '…the degree was new, the Director of Studies was very enthusiastic and he was very dedicated, so I think we were very lucky because it was his baby. Not just him but all the tutors supported us a lot' (Interview 7).

As such, relationships with staff could also be incredibly constructive and supportive even though the prevailing discourse was one of distance and disconnection. These relationships could make the difference between a student staying or leaving, and had the power to completely transform their experiences of university. Often this relationship was based on one member of staff taking an active interest in the student, and indicating that they valued and respected them. One example was Candidate 4. She was a 35-year old, white Social Work student who failed a course and found that:

> 'the support from the University was minimal' [but the process of resitting and passing] 'made me feel supported. I suppose there was a wee bit of unresolved things […] I felt that at last […] somebody believed in me, so that was important' (Interview 7).

A close relationship was also centred on the students' feeling that the staff not only listened to them, but acted on their feedback. Candidate 38, a 35-year old, white female student taking a Childhood Studies degree, felt well supported at university:

> 'We had really good support from the Course Director and the senior staff that were on the team for the BA. They really did listen to what you had to say, if you had any problems they helped you work through it - so we had really good support from the staff' (Interview 5).

Later in the same interview, she drew explicit attention to the power relations between staff and students, arguing that the philosophy of her Course Director, which, she felt, was based on recognising and working with the diversity of experience that mature students bring with them, levelled the hierarchy between them:

> 'I think as well they respected us as mature students and working people, which was really good and there was equality there, rather than being a student-teacher thing. There was recognition as well of our knowledge as well as our practice experience and ability. Anyway they were nice, they were really, really good'.

There was, however, an additional element here; perhaps an unspoken shared experience of social class. Students were clear that more connected relationships with staff helped

them to become better learners, particularly when they felt that they had things in common as Candidate 38 pointed out:

> '[my tutor] had the same sort of background as me so he was very understanding of my problems' (Interview 7).

Candidate 12, a 37 year-old, white woman studying Social Work, explained this a little more fully. While stating that a supportive relationship with a staff member was powerful for her learning, she saw this as a feature of an individual lecturer, rather than a widespread expectation of the staff group as a whole. She argued that good support:

> '… comes down to individual lecturers definitely. I always felt that there were some of the lecturers and tutors that gave you far better guidance, more personal guidance – and because you had a better relationship with them you'd known them since 1ˢᵗ and 2ⁿᵈ year, and some of them you'd only met in 3ʳᵈ year. So I think – the personal relationship wasn't there – and they didn't know much about your work or you. So if I think a tutor's got a more personal, a closer relationship, there's better feedback, better structure' (Interview 5).

Students' feelings about assessment and support may change over time, however. Candidate 41, a 38 year old, white Childhood Studies student said in Interview 3:

> 'It's soul destroying when I spent hours on that [essay] and he's said 'what about this and what about that'. He's not said, "Great you've included this and you've included that … and I'm pleased to see that you've researched that". There's nothing like that when he's giving his feedback' (Interview 3).

Later, however, in interview 7, she said that this tutor: 'gave you confidence to share your ideas and everything'. This suggests that the power of assessment does not necessarily compromise a caring relationship provided there is a strong connection between the student and staff member. This is because proactive academics, such as this tutor, demonstrate their understanding of students' experiences and so are perceived as caring about them.

Learning how to negotiate caring relationships: knowledge and agency

The neo-liberal paradigm shapes the institutional structures and cultures in which caring relationships are enacted. In universities, this depends on both knowledge and agency: students are expected to be self-reflexive, adult learners and to be able to identify their own problems. As a corollary of this, the university offers support in a way that is reactive and depends on the students having the agency to seek support in the right way. Across the interviews as a whole, there was a sense that this university was well-resourced and that a lot of help was available, but that this was only once the students knew where to look and how to access it. Getting to this point involved a very definitive learning curve. For example, Candidate 30, the 18 year-old entrant into Primary Education, spoke in an early interview about how difficult her first year of studies had been because she did not know what support was available or how to access it:

'It was all new last year, we didn't really know who to contact or how to contact them or if we did, for this year, you'd be able to just email them and see if they could give you any support that way' (Interview 3).

Again, the emotional dynamic of this came to the foreground and later in the same interview, she talked about the fear and worry of asking for help:

'I think they did [offer support] but just because, I don't know. Maybe I was scared, I don't know, what they would say.'

This cohort of students had come from the further education sector where (as they described to us at the first data-collection point) support from staff had been far more readily available. Not only were there more teachers, but students were allowed to submit and resubmit assessed work before a final mark was awarded. Having to learn a new way of asking for help was stressful for students when they came to university, and, at worst, left them in a position where they were worried about whether or not they could continue with their studies. Candidate 24 (aged 37, Childhood Studies degree) was a case in point. She described how she was having difficulties with her degree and had asked for help:

'twice I approached the tutor and I probably did not ask the right questions – I think – – for me to get information that I needed. Twice I came out of there and thought […] I cannot do this anymore, I cannot go back because I am coming out still not knowing' (Interview 5).

She went on to explain that what got her through was her 'desire to learn' coupled with working out how to navigate the complex system of support that was available. Key to this was learning that <u>she</u> had to do the groundwork, find out what support was available herself, and then take the initiative to ask for the help she needed. Getting to the point where she could do this was genuinely transformative:

'I think what helped me most was my desire to learn – at the end of the day I wanted to learn. It was all the support I got in here. Here, colleagues, in the library, resources in the university – over all I found – there was a lot of support' (interview 7).

Crucial to this was learning how to ask for this support:

'my knowledge of libraries was minimal and I went to the library and said, "Where can I find these books?" or "I cannot find this" and the staff in the library were very, very helpful […]; they would not leave you out on a limb. With tutors, you could approach them and [say] "Look I am struggling here" and they would go…"Tell me where you're struggling and we will see what we can come up with". My Director of Studies was brilliant – I was always "I'm falling apart"… '(interview 7)

The courage to ask for help is made harder by the complex landscape of support available to the students. Learning the structures of support in the university was a demanding process. With so many services targeted at specific needs, they often felt that their experiences were

fragmented and that no one had an overview of them as whole people. Candidate 44, a 35-year old white female studying Psychology, expressed this well:

> 'The help is there for all, any problem, you've got the help there but there's […] not somebody tying it together, you know. … It's like you go to a specific (service) … you know, whatever the problem is there is somebody there but it's difficult to find the right direction. I mean I know people that have been bounced from one to the other 'til they've eventually got to somebody that went, "No, you should be talking to so-and-so" and they take them to the right place. That adds to your stress, … it's worrying, it's whatever and it throws you off your concentration. You know, you're getting into a lecture and you're worrying about whether or not you'll get to a certain office in time to catch a certain person because you've been told they'll be able to help you. That side of it needs a wee bit more gelling together' (Interview 3).

What emerges clearly from the interviews was the sense that in the neo-liberal university, students do not always know where to go for help. Rather, they came to this realisation often through a process of trial and error as they tried to work out how best to negotiate a landscape that did offer a multitude of support, but in fragmented, compartmentalised ways. As we have seen, it was often their commitment to learning that motivated them to keep going and to seek to find the caring relationships that might make a difference to their university experience.

Discussion and conclusion

Research has shown that positive relationships with staff enable students to gain both self-confidence and motivation and improve their work, provided that 'students feel that staff believe in them, and care about the outcomes of their studying' (Thomas, 2002, p. 432). Our study has shown that students' experience of such caring relationships could not be guaranteed; on the contrary, students felt lucky when they found them, and actually, more than a little surprised. Our research therefore supports the contention that the neo-liberal discourse of audit and performativity, which focuses on what is accessible to measure (such as research outputs), has impacted negatively on the quality of student support (Lynch, 2014). In particular, it has led to the prioritisation by staff of research over teaching and support and, in the context of the massification of higher education, this means that academic staff have only limited ability to respond to the demands that students make on their time (Cree et al., 2016).

It is also clear from our findings, however, that whilst the affective dimension may not be prioritised to the degree that we (staff and students) would wish, both staff and students strive to keep a supportive, caring relationship intact. Students in our study actively sought out support from academic staff, whilst being realistic that this support was limited and that they needed to be proactive in asking for help. This, of course, raises another important issue that care often goes proportionally to the 'more articulate and assertive, whose needs are often less than those of the poor and disempowered' (Johnston, & Simpson, 2006: 35). This finding gives rise to questions of social justice about how staff can personalise students' learning journeys and thus enhance students' learning without unfairly responding to those with the cultural and social capital to enable them to know the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu

and Passeron, 1977). Our data showed that some students find staff 'scary' because of the distance that they perceive exists between them, so their ability to get the help that they need is going to be more limited than that available to their more confident peers.

In reviewing the field, Shin suggests that students need to feel that staff are both 'available' (that is, 'what is needed or desired is obtainable upon request') and 'connected' (that is, 'that a reciprocal relationship exists' between the staff member and the student) (2002, p. 123). Our findings illustrate both the closeness and the distance from staff that was perceived by students and the difficulties they experienced in achieving 'connectedness'. We have also shown the problems of 'availability' experienced by students who had to work hard to navigate the complex system of support, which, although it was available, was sometimes difficult to access. What made a difference here was how reciprocal and frequent the contact with staff was so that the 'emotional quality of strong ties' (Morosanu et al. 2010: 675) could be developed. For most students, these strong ties were not available and instead, they had to rely on their own motivation and commitment to construct support for their emotional selves. The students had internalised these low expectations of care from academic staff and, as a result, did not seem to resent the requirement that they manage their own sources of help.

Who gives and receives care also depends on institutional cultures and structures and it is clear from the students in this study that, whilst support is available, it is also very fragmented and reactive in nature. As Burke, points out, 'neoliberal imperatives re-emphasize techno-rationalist discourses of human capital and individual responsibility' (2015: 391), so it is an easy assumption to make that students should take responsibility for finding their own care and support. Yet, as Walsh and colleagues (2009) have shown, students are much more likely to trust academic staff to have an understanding of their experience and be able to offer appropriate help. As universities make more demands on staff then their ability to navigate the support system for students is diminished and so students are required to do it for themselves.

In conclusion, we can say that, whilst staff and students exist in a world driven primarily by the ideology of neo-liberalism, the narrative of care has not been lost from view. In this study, the tension between the quantitative spaces of the neo-liberal university and its empathetic, caring spaces have been mediated by students as they make their way through their degrees. This suggests that personal relationships between staff and students have become part of the multiplicity of responses to questions of care of the emotional self within higher education. In the light of this, we suggest that a more holistic approach to care should be considered where students and staff are actively seeking to include emotions in the construction of knowledge rather than seeing reason and emotion as a binary (see Leathwood and Hay, 2009). Tronto (2010) has suggested that it would be better to understand care as a life-sustaining web of relations that support individual and collective well-being and enhance teaching and learning. If that were the case, the priority would shift from care-giving with all its attendant emphasis on 'demand' and 'need' to an education that respects genuine difference among people and emphasises equal opportunity for students of varying abilities and interests. Whilst this may be a difficult vision to achieve, it is vital if we are to resist the limiting neo-liberal discourse that reduces students to numbers and staff to economic actors.

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