

Measurement imperatives and their impact: Academic staff narratives on riding the metric tide

TAYLOR, Carol <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-8461>>, HARRIS-EVANS, Jean, GARNER, Iain, FITZGERALD, Damien and MADRIAGA, Manuel <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/17697/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

TAYLOR, Carol, HARRIS-EVANS, Jean, GARNER, Iain, FITZGERALD, Damien and MADRIAGA, Manuel (2018). Measurement imperatives and their impact: Academic staff narratives on riding the metric tide. In: Equality and differentiation in marketised higher education: A new level playing field? Palgrave Studies in Excellence and Equity in Global Education . Palgrave Macmillan, 171-194. [Book Section]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Measurement imperatives and their impact: Academic staff narratives on riding the metric tide

Carol Taylor, Jean Harris-Evans, Iain Garner, Damien Fitzgerald, Manny Madriaga

Abstract

Higher education is in the grip of an unprecedented level of attention to quantitative performance indicators. The recent trajectory of government policy discourses position such measures as necessary in enabling students to have more and better information to inform their choices, in ensuring that institutions are more transparent in their offer, and in justifying to the public that government funding for higher education is well-spent. Measurement imperatives are, therefore, positioned in policy discourses as key to the generation of market competition and institutional differentiation. But beyond government policymakers, many are sceptical about their use and value. Some consider that the measures themselves are flawed instruments; some are concerned about their role in increasing surveillance of staff; and some feel they have little value in relation to enhancing knowledge and knowing, improving pedagogic relationships and developing learning communities. This chapter uses a narrative approach to explore these tensions. It includes five academics' accounts of their personal responses to measurement imperatives. In tracing how individual narratives intersect with broader discourses of marketisation, equity and differentiation, the chapter activates the sociological imagination (C. Wright Mills, 1959) to bring into closer view some vital questions about the aims, purpose and value of contemporary higher education.

Introduction and Context

This chapter drills down to a more specific set of issues - the 'metric tide' and its ramifications for academics and students - and a specific context. As such it represents a different perspective – one which highlights the concerns academics have about market pressures and about what is of value to them in relation to equality, equity and social justice in the system. The five narratives which sit at the heart of this chapter were written by academic staff with different roles in an Education department in a post-1992 university. In negotiating a path through, and in relation to, measurement imperatives, the staff use their narratives to speak of what is important to them as academics, of what matters to them in their dealings with students and colleagues, and of how they relate to the performative discourses and practices which shape their working lives. In doing so, the narratives provide compelling evidence

about how measurement imperatives are lived, performed and experienced by academic staff.

The context for the chapter is the unprecedented and increasing rise of quantitative measures in higher education. Pusser and Marginson (2013) discuss how competitive ranking operates at variety of levels and scales on a playing field which is geared towards the production of advantage for a small number of universities but which has consequences for all. Naidoo (2011) notes that competition is rigged towards elite universities in the most powerful nations. What she refers to as the ‘new imperialism’ means that success in global league tables informs institutional reputations and is a key factor in competitive advantage in the international student market. These factors operate in national systems with similar effects. Alongside this, discourses of the student as consumer, and the paramount importance of individual choice, has been attached to economic advantage, the bottom line of which is that only a ‘good’ (i.e. 2:1) degree is worthwhile, and a degree is only worthwhile in terms of employment outcomes. These discourses are working, in the broader sense, to marginalise notions of higher education as a public good, but they have also been the vehicle for pushing the use of measurement imperatives more deeply than ever before into academic practices of teaching and learning. In doing so, they are reshaping the nature of academic life and reconstituting student-teacher relations (Naidoo and Whitty, 2014).

It is these effects of marketization, differentiation and equity with which this chapter is principally concerned. The institutional use of national surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers from HE (DLHE) data has a profound effect on academic staff; these measurement imperatives feature heavily in their daily working lives and shape their academic practices, teaching, and relations with students. In England, in addition to the NSS and DLHE there is now the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and, for research staff, the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Measurement imperatives enact in very concrete form the broader sector discourses of competition, status differentiation and student choice referred to above. They also bring into sharp relief other discourses, such as the commitment to education as a vehicle for improving life chances. This chapter places academic staff views on performative measures at its heart in order to illuminate how it feels to be working at the sharp point of an increasing range and variety of

quantitative measures. But the narratives also speak out beyond their specific contexts to the broader discourses concerning equality, equity and differentiation which this book identifies as currently reshaping the higher education landscape.

The Metric Tide

As indicated above, measurement imperatives underpin neoliberal agendas to enhance institutional competition, improve consumer (student) choice, and extend market functions deeper into the HE sector (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Yet the government's view of the usefulness of measurement imperatives is at odds with those of some working in the sector, for a variety of reasons. Wilsdon *et al.* (2015: viii) are sceptical about the value of an ever increasing number and range of measurement imperatives, and argue the 'metric tide' places 'too much emphasis on narrow, poorly-designed indicators [which] can have negative consequences'. There have long been concerns about the validity and reliability of the NSS – the key metric for assessing student 'satisfaction' – as indicated by a recent review which highlighted:

'conceptual weaknesses concerning what it [the NSS] measured, and methodological weaknesses related to what it covered ... the NSS's scope was too narrow in terms of students' experiences and their engagement in learning and teaching [and this] undermined the NSS's efficacy in informing student choice and enhancing students' academic experience' (NatCen, 2014: 3).

Concerns such as these prompted the Higher Education Academy to develop the UK Engagement Survey, which seeks to measure 'satisfaction' more broadly by focusing specifically on students' engagement with learning and teaching in relation to their studies (Buckley, 2014). Likewise, there is also little hard evidence to suggest that students use performative measures in any concerted and/or rational way to inform their post-university career decision-making. Diamond *et al.* (2012) note that many students make 'arbitrary choices' about their HE destinations' while Jerrim's (2011) study indicates that students have a tendency to overestimate their post-qualification. This would appear to indicate that students make scant use of metrics even when they are available. Relevant also are the long-standing critiques of the REF (McNay, 2015; Thelwall, 2014) and more recent ones of the TEF (Ashwin, 2017) which outline the

problems which arise when using metrics and performance indicators to ‘measure’ complex educational practices such as teaching, learning and research.

Such studies feed into academics’ fears that what Ball (2003) calls the ‘neoliberal epidemic’ of performative measures disregard what is most of value in learning and teaching, such as deep engagement with subject matter as a means of induction into a discipline, a field, or a profession. They are concerned that learning as a collaborative venture is suffering; and they also worry that in the ‘cut-throat marketplace that is today’s university’ (Egginton, 2016) critical thinking is being replaced by ‘comfortable truths’ which do not challenge the student and thereby ensure high ‘satisfaction’ scores.

Methodology

These differing views indicate that the value and purpose of measurement imperatives is a highly contested topic – and one particularly amenable to being explored via a narrative lens. This is because narratives offer rich biographical accounts of how complex processes impact on individuals and how broader discourses shape attitudes and practices. It is for this reason that the chapter utilizes what C. Wright Mills (1959) calls ‘the sociological imagination’. This is a mode of analyzing a topic which enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals’ (Mills, 1959: 5). The sociological imagination is about ‘grasp[ing] history and biography and the relations between the two in society’ (Mills, 1959: 6). We therefore seek to put the sociological imagination to work in this chapter to draw out what Mills calls ‘points of intersections’ between individual concerns about the impact of measurement imperatives on learning and teaching and broader concerns about marketization, equity and differentiation.

The process of writing the narrative ‘biographies’ was as follows. Each author wrote a narrative expressing their particular ‘take’ on measurement imperatives. The narratives were shared, discussed collectively, and then revised based on feedback, with the whole group acting as critical friends. The revised narratives were then brought back to the group and collaboratively analyzed for emerging themes which

resonated across the narratives. Two things about this part of the process are worth noting. First, that while individuals agreed that themes as ‘points of intersection’ were important in providing a clear focus for their shared concerns, there was also agreement that the narratives were not about presenting ‘a smooth account’ of those concerns. In line with the sociological imagination methodology adopted, and as the five staff narratives in the following section show, the narratives are biographical accounts arising from particularities of role, place and teaching biography and have value as ‘personal’, textured expressions of specificity, individuality and difference. Second, the narratives were subject to a process of mutual discussion and analytical critique in order to identify ‘the public issues’ which frame them, again in accordance with Mills (1959: 8) methodology. Here, there was a great deal of agreement. All staff identified marketization and measurement practices as significant in their everyday work and saw discourses which promoted competition as increasingly important in shaping their relations with students. However, the impacts were experienced as variable and, while staff shared a strong social justice commitment, they differed in their perceptions of what that meant in practice. The five narratives follow in alphabetical order of surname.

Five Academics’ Narratives

Damien’s Narrative

I have taught in H.E. for a decade. My role has two broad elements: teaching and learning; and leading a team of academic staff from varied professional and academic backgrounds. Over this time there has been significant change across the sector as the discourse of performance and marketization has become more prevalent. This has contributed to a sense that a degree is commodity to be obtained, rather than a partnership of teaching and learning. This presents challenges and causes me to reflect on my approach to teaching and on my academic leadership role.

I see teaching as key to enable students to develop their knowledge and understanding of the subject and to promote independent learning, a view which is informed by my belief that learning takes place throughout life, both formally and informally. To support this, I start at a point familiar to learners, building on their knowledge and

experience of the subject, engaging them in active learning, and enabling each person to construct links between their past experiences and present understanding. This approach supports active learning and knowledge synthesis (Donavan, Bransford and Pellegrino, 1999; Wallace, 2014). However, I find that students are often preoccupied by module assessment tasks and are primarily focused on the assessment outcome i.e. the module mark. This can be at odds with my vision of learning as a vehicle to equip individuals to engage in lifelong learning and develop professionally and personally (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). While this is understandable, it means there is often a disjoint between my views and my students' views. My discussions with students reveal that they often put more effort in accumulating facts to gain a higher mark; whereas my experience tells me that more focus on learning and intellectual processes is the thing most likely to lead to deeper understanding and, ultimately, a better mark. My sense is that this disjoint is decreasing the intellectual complexity and scholarly impact of H.E. study. However, this situation is not surprising, given the focus in education on measuring attainment which, for many, started at the age of five.

Alongside this, institutional demands for efficiency have led to significant changes in teaching delivery, culminating in a move to delivering more sessions in large lectures, and reduced periods of time spent with students in smaller seminar groups. While this approach offers students the opportunity to be introduced to ideas and concepts, they also need to feel confident in develop these ideas independently and with peers. The problem is that external measures, such as the NSS, place the emphasis on individual learning experiences and personal development, and this can work against my aim as a teacher to support individuals to develop a critical understanding of ideals and concepts in collaboration with others.

For three years, I have managed an academic team from varied professional backgrounds related to the academic discipline of childhood studies. The challenges of large group teaching impact on our team. To respond to these, the team has worked on embedding technology and other pedagogical approaches to promote interactive learning. For example, using Twitter, online 'wall posts' and interactive group activities. If these approaches are to be successful students need to be confident in acquiring and utilising knowledge with a high degree of autonomy. But, again, this is at odds with some aspects of the NSS. For example, the NSS questions focused on

advice and support, ('I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies') may not be sufficiently useful in picking up the support staff provide in small group or individual work. Our reflections on this as an academic team brings challenges because the resource constraints within the sector, institution and department impacts, at least to some degree, on how achievable this is. Tension emerge between individual student aspirations, the desire of academic staff to engage students in high-level learning to promote critical thinking, the financial environment, and those broader marketization and measurement discourses of the sector.

The discourses of marketization and measurement are at the centre of my role as a lecturer and academic leader. Whilst the urge to facilitate continual improvement is both necessary and welcome, there has to be a realistic hope that positive change is possible. However, the power to enact change does not always reside with those charged with accountability for the improvement. As Foucault (1998) noted, the technologies of power (strategies operations and expectations that shape conduct) and technologies of self (which aim for self-improvement through self-surveillance and self-discipline) cannot always or easily be achieved through self-regulation. My strategy has been to focus on developing a strong academic team identity. However, if academic teams are expected to achieve continual improvement, then this needs to be resourced and achievable. If not, it risks creating a sense of failure, which will be to the detriment of academic staff, students and the sector more broadly.

As an academic leader, I recognise and respond to these challenges but sometimes the tensions are not always fully reconcilable. An example of this is the release of NSS results each year. The team I lead enthusiastically engage in evaluation of the data and identify developments and feasible changes for improving the student experience but then find that they have limited power to address institutional-level issues. This is a cause of some staff frustration and a feeling of disempowerment.

Jean's Narrative: A Crowd of Competing Voices

Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.
(Deleuze & Guattari, 2014, p. 1)

I am that several. I have my own personal crowd. I am the Department's Business lead, an academic, an ex-youth work practitioner, and a course leader. My current and previous roles, identities and experiences all produce different voices that conflict, collide and coincide by turn. Each of these distinct voices cries vociferously for attention in the crowd, often electing to appear at awkward or inappropriate junctures, demanding to be heard.

The first of those voices understands very well that the academy is a business. The voice of business-speak reflects the wider neoliberal hegemony that dominates the UK Higher Education sector. That voice understands that the only way to survive as an institution is to feed the capitalist tail; that is: to generate more business; to compete; to strive; to focus on the costing model. How else are we to survive if we cannot work to a sustainable financial model? This voice understands the importance of embracing the rational logic of accountability, the bureaucratic imperative. This voice also expends some of its energy encouraging colleagues to complete paperwork, to comply with the strident demands of bureaucracy. After all, if we can 'just' complete that task then we can concentrate on what matters? If we can be more efficient then clearly we can be more effective?

The second member of my personal crowd – the academic – bemoans the focus on administrative systems, on technical rationality. This voice asserts that 'the systems' seem to increasingly dominate our existence and distract from the important (forms to verify assessment instruments. Really? Whatever happened to having a meaningful discussion with colleagues?). This voice wants to look beyond the established order to challenge the received wisdom and question the 'taken for granted'. It wants to produce new knowledge; it does not want to be distracted.

The voice I have the most difficulty with is the third one, my practitioner voice. It wants to dominate my crowd, it wants to push the other voices to the margins, and worse, it demands action, not just words. This voice wants to exhaust all its timbre on the students, particularly on those students who are the most marginalised, the ones who have had the most difficult journey to get to, and stay in, the land of Higher Education. This voice has its own praxis, one that demands from each (of us as academics) according to our ability, to each (student) according to their need. This

voice does not fit into the academic crowd easily for it suggests a deliberate unequal distribution of resources within the student body. It suggests an expanding set of resources in the form of academic time which is simply not deemed feasible when teaching sets are focused on large numbers of students and a small number of tutors. Our current system is one where one-to-one work is strictly rationed; a differential allocation of that time would be perceived as being unfair to other students. How can my practitioner voice ever be allowed to lend its support to the complex and diverse student transitions journey (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2016) and *really* promote widening participation?

This latter conundrum is instantiated by the fourth voice in my personal crowd, that of a course leader of a small, fragile youth work course at the margins of the academy. What happens on the course is, I think, very important for the students, and for the marginalised young people and communities ‘out there’ where our students work. Many of our students are from such communities and have not previously succeeded in the education system. Success in Higher Education transforms them as individuals and exorcises some demons along the way. This course supports that success as it is small, runs on an intense group work model, and is (relatively) heavily resourced. The students gain a professional qualification and much more. But these students will not shine in a key metric, the DLHE data, as they are likely to be on low-paid, short-term contracts. The work they do with marginalised young people and communities both during their time with us, and subsequently, is important but undervalued in terms of esteem and remuneration (Unison, 2016). This sort of work is not a measurement that ‘counts’ in the current HE system. These students face a precarious future working in a precarious sector. To draw on Standing’s (2011) use of the term precariat, my students work in a precariat-sector - the youth work sector - that relies on precarious short-term funding models (Harris-Evans, 2017) and, as graduates, are likely to be employed in precarious conditions on precarious contracts in a sector that is chronically underfunded.

At the time of writing the future of my course is ‘under review’ and it's difficult to see a place in the University's future for decisions that reverse the logic of the marketized environment and give space to those who I have dubbed precariat-students, that is, those marginalised part time, mature students whose numbers have seen such a

catastrophic decline in recent years. There is, to put it bluntly, no money or prestige in any of this. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, my voices keep on shouting over each other, not listening. Some of the voices are angry, but most are numb and heavy with resignation.

Iain's Narrative: Usain Bolt, Cakes and Measuring Performance

I have worked in higher education for 23 years and have had senior leadership roles for 13 years, acting as Director of Markets and Recruitment, Head of Faculty Taught Programmes, and currently as Head of Department. My academic background is Psychology and I teach on various degree courses.

Measurement is an oddly bland word when first inspected, orderly, functional, but not invigorating or exciting. I believe this is due to the fact that measurement relates not to the assets but rather the amount we have of those assets. Perhaps it is this functional imperative which lies behind the initial feeling that measurement is secondary and perhaps not as important as the actions we take or things which we make.

However, on closer inspection measurement can take on a different and more important role in how we view the world. We know of Usain Bolt not because he can run, most people can, but because he has run faster than any other person on earth. When measured he is the fastest. Measurement here gives status, power, primacy. Without measurement it would be down to subjective arguments about who was fastest, arguments which would lack the simple clarity of measurement. However, measurement doesn't simply have the utility to assign the largest, smallest, fastest tag to things or individuals. Measurement also provides the possibility of creating the right combinations. Cakes on the *Great British Bake-Off* only work when the ingredients are accurately measured and combined in the right order to ensure the chemistry of baking is allowed to do its thing. Measurement is essential if things are going to work, without it we would be back to subjective perspectives on how much sugar is needed in that sponge. Measurement, then, provides both objectivity (the fastest) and replicability (making excellent cakes).

So what happens when measurement is applied to higher education? With regard to the first HE measure – ‘who's the best?’ – we are notably challenged. When assessing Usain Bolt the task is simple – which person dashes across the line before anyone else? Easy. Applying this to universities is far more complex. What is it we should be measuring? Research output, student attainment, value added to the students, social impact, tax pounds earned from graduate employment? Each would be a relevant and interesting measure of the best university. Indeed, the league tables set about combining these to come up with formula which reveals the ‘best’. So perhaps the best measure is possible. However, there are further complications as we need to bring into play what the audience is seeking from the measurement of best. Does industry want a measurement of appropriate graduate attributes? Does government want an index of graduate contribution to the economy and society? Does an individual want a measurement of where they will be supported most effectively? To do all this is problematic. We could only identify the best university if there were agreement on what the best university would do and be; if we lack this we must have as many measures as possible and allow people to interpret these to inform their thinking and decisions.

This brings us to the second type of measurement, that which is designed to allow replicability. The best way of knowing what we do is to record what we do. In recording we are establishing types of measures, creating benchmarks and reference points. I consider this essential within HE: we need to continually improve, to evolve and change. Ultimately this is what the NSS and PTES should do for universities, they should allow the universities the opportunity to view the lifeworld of the student, the students' conception of best. In case of the NSS, the measures have a further function: they externalise information, they write large social messages about institutions and how they are serving students. Again, I see this as positive in intent, while challenging the details and the means by which it can be done.

In my view, Universities should be subject to rigorous measures, these measures should be widely published, and freely available. However, I equally believe that measures are part of a serious, valuable and unavoidable part of dialogue amongst stakeholders. They cannot, therefore, be an objective arbiter of ultimate performance without narrative, context and specific institutional goals.

As Head of Department, measurement is a part of my life, a part of marketization and performativity which I feel is a robust part of HE reality. I therefore willingly and positively engage with these measurements as I firmly believe that to not do so would disadvantage the students and my colleagues' experience. However, I equally don't see them as the key or the sole driver of our actions; a significant one, yes, but the sole one, no. There has to be room for academic challenge, freedom and creativity to inform our constant development as teachers, as a department and as co-learners with our students. The measures also need to be shared with the students, explained to the students and critiqued by the students as many of these measurements are being done in their name. This may allow the measures to be understood and hopefully owned by all of those who are subject to the measurements they yield.

Manny's Narrative: 'The world won't get no better if we just let it be'

I am a Senior Lecturer in Education. Prior to that I worked in academic development, using institution-level data to promote teaching and learning innovation. My PhD was a critique of 'whiteness'.

Wake up everybody no more sleepin' in bed
No more backward thinkin' time for thinkin' ahead
The world has changed so very much
From what it used to be
There is so much hatred, war and poverty
Wake up all the teachers time to teach a new way
Maybe then they'll listen to whatcha have to say
'Cause they're the ones who's coming up and the world is in their hands
When you teach the children teach em the very best you can
The world won't get no better if we just let it be
 'Wake Up Everybody' by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes (1975)

I have always perceived the first verse of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' *Wake Up Everybody* as a prophetic call. It provides me with meaning, a sense of enchantment in a Weberian sense, in my everyday life as a course leader in Education Studies. This enchantment 'conjures up, and is rooted in, understandings and experiences of the world in which there is more to life than the material, the visible or the explainable' (Jenkins, 2000: 29). It is juxtaposed to the iron cage of rationalising and bureaucratising the university student experience. Hence, I grasp the Harold

Melvin verse as my vision and values as to why I *wake up* each morning, holding strong to Giroux's (2003) critical pedagogy and making it culturally relevant to those students I teach and support (Ladson Billings, 2013). This, for me, means being able to lead students to become better informed democratic citizens to combat social injustice. With this mind, I am not averse to the use of metrics and learning analytics to *teach a new way*. I want to continuously improve my craft, not only for my own professional development, but to have the knowledge and confidence to offer challenging learning experiences to students.

With all its documented flaws (see above and Bennett and Kane, 2014), the National Student Survey and the data it generates drives innovation and change at course level. There are other mechanisms to acquire the student voice such as staff-student committee minutes and module evaluation questionnaires. However, the NSS offers holistic evidence on the student experience at *course* level.

Just as I express optimism about the NSS (which marks me out as rare amongst my teaching colleagues), I also welcome the provision in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HMSO 2017) that the *Office for Students* will hold institutions accountable to drive for excellence in teaching, widen participation and minimise the risks of young people dropping-out of higher education. This is congruent with my vision and values in seeing various metrics, even learning analytics, as helpful in improving developments at course level. Learning analytics, for example, allows us to gauge every digital interaction a student has with their university, which can include library use, engaging in virtual learning environments, or submitting assignments online. Learning analytics have shown that greater student engagement is positively related to both progression and attainment (Sclater, Peasgood and Mullan 2016: 35).

...*backward thinkin'*... (sort of)

Metrics and learning analytics humbles me, grounds me with the idea that I am always *becoming* a teacher (Madriaga and Goodley, 2010). However, I do have reservations when the same metrics and learning analytics are employed to benchmark with comparator institutions, and inform national newspaper league tables.

This, of course, stems from the neo-liberalism and performative ethic that Ball (2003) foretold and is affirmed in the Teaching Excellence Framework (HMSO 2017). This is detrimental and promotes concern that a student-as-consumer is likely to form unrealistic expectations of both their experience and their attainment in a higher educational culture ('if the university exists for me, I will - I should - get high marks'). This is contrary to my vision and attachments to higher education learning.

I say this as someone who was born and raised in the USA where my immigrant parents scraped and put money aside to pay for my university education. This practice was considered *normal* then, and remains *normal* now in the USA, for many families. Honestly, I never saw myself as a *student-as-consumer* (even having paid more in university fees and expenses than UK students do today). Now, as I reminisce on my life as a student, I worked full-time hours simultaneously pursuing a full-time degree. I am not boasting here about struggle. I say this as someone who sees young adults with a similar working poor, brown-skinned, racialized background as myself having to confront more obstacles than I did to access higher education (particularly Russell Group universities) (see Boliver, 2016).

The worldly observations of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes made decades ago remains relevant today as there is *so much hatred, war and poverty*. I do want to *teach a new way* as I desire to see students as change agents (Fielding, 2001), who will, hopefully, in their own way, tackle societal and global ills. This is what motivates me. Metrics hold me accountable to make this happen in a positive way. But these same metrics cause anxieties within me, such as being an actor in the reproduction of class and racial inequality in a stratified higher education sector.

Carol's Narrative: The Classroom as Radical Space of Possibility

I am Professor of Gender and Higher Education in the Sheffield Institute of Education. I began my academic career with the Open University and, since then, have worked in various Universities all the while trying to maintain my belief in education as a force for equality.

My narrative is inspired by MacAllister's (2016) critique of the 'horse race' mentality of the audit culture which promotes a narrow definition of effectiveness over values. In his article, 'What should educational institutions be for?', MacAllister takes issue with the prevailing idea of education as a) an individualistic pursuit amenable to measurement, and b) a process of acquiring skills with the aim of ensuring positional advantage in the jobs market. He suggests that such narrowly performative and human capital measures of higher education fail to take adequate account of its broader purposes: that higher education is about creating conditions of learning which enable students to think *for* themselves rather than thinking *of* themselves, and that it is a social as much as an individual good. This resonates with me and encourages me to reflect on my academic practice.

I am interested in bell hooks' (1994) view that the higher education classroom is a radical space of possibility for the production of new forms of knowledge which might enhance social justice. I agree. But, in my experience, many students enter university after years of being schooled to see knowledge as an indisputable entity – a 'thing' – which is decanted from expert Lecturer to 'empty' student vessel, then to be 'deposited', 'banked'. 'invested' and 'drawn out' for specific purposes such as taking exams, getting a job, or answering questions on quiz shows. Such a transmission view is not about promoting knowledge for social justice but ensuring compliance. It neglects students' agency, and makes them feel that the act of thinking for themselves is tricky, uncomfortable, and something to be resisted. Many students don't like doing it ... at first. But, in my experience, once students get a taste for thinking they like it, and can do it well.

I see it happen every year on an undergraduate module I teach, on which I work with students as partners to co-create the curriculum (Taylor and Bovill, 2017). Co-creating the curriculum does two things. First, it gives students greater scope to produce knowledge rather than passively consume it. The process of co-creation engages students in questions such as: What is worthwhile knowledge? Why? How to include it? And where? Who gets to decide? Discussing these questions enables students to see that knowledge is contestable, that there are multiple answers to most questions, and that they themselves can have a meaningful say in the process of knowledge-construction. In addition, I have found that talking with students about

‘what counts?’ as knowledge, and ‘who decides what counts?’, becomes (often quite quickly) an eye-opening and profound political and philosophical debate about the purpose, value and aims of education. These conversations can be discomfiting and disorientating but energising and worth it because they help develop an attitude of mind, an open orientation, in which education is about being able to think beyond the same, to think for themselves. Can there be a better way to prepare students for their future social life as responsible citizens?

Second, the process of curriculum co-creation supports the development of a learning community. In the module, students collaborate to develop ground rules for giving public feedback via a blog platform on each other’s draft written work for assessment. Once agreed, the ground rules work as an ethical contract and guide. Students take this contract very seriously. They put time, care and effort into the task of giving feedback, and their feedback is a genuine and honest attempt to help their fellow students improve their work. I have never yet come across one student who has done a poor feedback job, or not given the best developmental advice they possibly could. They do their best because they believe – based on the contract they had collectively agreed – that the other person will do the same for them. And they do. The feedback task is a minor example of how curriculum co-creation helps develop communitarian practices which are shaped around generosity and concern for others; it layers in the promotion of democratic values into initiation into worthwhile forms of knowledge. Education *is* about the self – but self-fulfilment and self-development need not be an individual, selfish, or exclusionary pursuit. So, like bell hooks, I see the space of the classroom as a space of possibility – for learning relationally and collaboratively in order that education can be about the common good, a good which takes us beyond the self.

So, what *are* educational institutions are for? In my view, they are spaces for engendering hope – hope that ‘the range of present possibilities is always greater than the established order is able to allow for’. Hope is vital and it has an important place in the classroom, it should also have a place in our conversations with students and colleagues, and in learning. The classroom may be a micro-site in the larger performative institution but my hope is that it can be a space where a ‘utopianism of the present’ (MacIntyre, 2013: 17) can take hold and grow. And, as MacAllister

(2016: 389) points out ‘in this age of measurement, utopian thinking about the purposes of education [is] needed now, more than ever’.

Discussion: Points of Intersection

In this section, we focus on those ‘points of intersection’ (Mills, 1959) which connect individuals’ biographies and narratives to the use of measurement imperatives and to the broader discourses of marketization, differentiation and equity.

Points of intersection 1: Marketization as a ‘webby’ matter of concern

Latour (2004: 231) makes the forceful point that critique needs to move away from deconstructing matters of fact in order to find a more positive engagement with ‘matters of concern’. He notes that, while matters of fact tend to be partial, polemical, and politically driven, matters of concern are engaged value positions, they are ethical and even moral. They are also ‘webby’ and gather multifarious things together (Latour, 2004: 246). The discourse of marketization which positions the student-as-consumer is one such ‘webby’ matter of concern to emerge in all our narratives, and is the first and major point of intersection.

All five narratives indicate concerns over the three interrelated policy technologies of the market, managerialism and performativity that Ball (2003) named as ‘terrors’ that governed the souls of those in education. But, in line with our different biographies, these ‘terrors’ appear in various guises. Manny and Carol’s narratives express concern that the student-as-consumer discourse is establishing what Sayer (2011) calls an input-output model of teaching, effectively turning teaching into something akin to an industrial process. The argument here is that this inevitably leads to a teaching and learning model oriented to the individualised, privatised and competitive pursuit of advantage over others. The matter of concern, then, is that learning is defined too narrowly as an instrumental means to a singular economic end – and the privileging of DLHE data in the TEF, for example, appears to confirm this. In Damien’s narrative, these concerns are articulated in relation to shifts to large group teaching which are driven by measurement imperatives and work against learning practices which require close understanding of students’ identities, histories and prior

experiences. These tensions are made apparent in NSS scores which have real effects in terms of resourcing courses and staff morale.

The economic imperatives now pressing down on HEIs and on managers at every level are, however, not straightforward, and the complex impacts of the continuing drive for greater efficiencies are acknowledged in Jean's narrative. Here, the matter of concern is the conflicts between marketization and a commitment to positive equality – as Jean highlights, there is an irreconcilable tension between the increased rationing of resources and the protection of a small course which serves marginalised students. This is the sharp end of measurement imperatives where it seems that equality has to be compromised to meet the demands of marketization. This point indicates the unevenness of how systemic changes play out at local level for individual academics and how these are shaped, as Deem (2001) points out, by local cultures and the specificity of organisational characteristics. So, the fact that this course gets cut, but not that course, indicates how apparently 'rational' market decisions can have profound local, social and educational consequences.

A more positive view of measurement imperatives can be seen in Iain's and Manny's narratives. The argument here is that the sector needs to have robust measures to (a) demonstrate the quality of its provision to various stakeholders while recognising that those measures need to be shared, open to contestation and that 'one size does not fit all' (Iain), and (b) that learning analytics can be a positive force to improve learning (Manny). Both of these narratives take a pragmatic stance while both also express concern about the *nature and types* of measurement currently used: their fitness for purpose is seen as open to question as is their use in further stratifying and already hierarchized higher education system.

None of the narratives are anti-measurement; all staff recognise and accept that measurement imperatives are here to stay and are now part and parcel of the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 1999) that constitutes the lifeworld of HE. What the narratives foreground are particular matters of concerns in relation to how marketization processes are being translated into performative measurement imperatives which are reshaping broader perceptions of the aims and purposes of education in some contentious ways. The student-as-consumer discourse makes

‘choice’ paramount and draws into its web a myriad of other academic practices which then become available to the imperatives of measurement. But how to not just measure but *value* multifarious, complex and heterogeneous academic practices such as student engagement, teaching excellence and learning gain, to mention but a few, remains an open question.

Points of Intersection 2: Equality, Equity and the Cultivation of a Pedagogy for Hope

Across the sector there are fears that higher education is turning into a rather bleak landscape characterised by loss of collegiality, erosion of trust in professional autonomy, and reduced scope for agency (Taylor and McCaig, 2014). Measurement imperatives play a key role in these fears, fears which are also evident in our narratives. Alongside that, though, there is something else also evident: hope. Manny’s narrative makes this most explicit. Drawing on his own educational biography, Manny argues that a culturally relevant pedagogy is not only a pedagogic tool to combat racism and enhance institutional diversity, it can also be the very thing that inspires *us* (lecturers) to get up in the morning. In Damien’s view, developing students’ skills is not about getting them to be critical in a vacuum; it is about promoting their practical reasoning so that they have the necessary understanding to question unjust social and economic arrangements. Jean also makes this point and frames it within a social justice commitment to widening participation. And Carol’s philosophically-inflected narrative considers the classroom as a potentially transgressive pedagogic space for hope to take hold.

Paulo Freire (1994: 2) considered hope to be an ‘ontological need’ which countered fatalism and pessimism. He thought that without hope we would be paralyzed, immobilized. Freire (1994: 2) called hope a ‘concrete imperative’ that helps sustain us in the ‘fierce struggle [to] re-create the world’. But hope cannot be woolly or amorphous, it ‘demands an anchoring in practice’. Across the narratives, concerns arise about how to protect a pedagogy *for* hope in the midst of performative regimes. However, the narratives do not present hope as an easy panacea to the supposed ‘ills’ of measurement. Hope is seen as an ontological resource that toughens us up (staff and students alike) so that we might be able to connect theory to praxis. Our individual biographies disclose a shared commitment to, and belief in, the possibility

of education to transform lives. This is not a grand mission for system transformation. It is a grounded, local and *in situ* pedagogic practice of working with these students in this room here and now. As bell hooks (2003: xiii) says, hopeful pedagogy is about the ‘many quiet moments of incredible shifts in thought and action’.

Discourses of equality and equal opportunity inform our pedagogic commitments to higher education as a critical space for hope, creativity and change. Four of the narratives indicate explicit commitments to equal opportunity, greater diversity, and the use of higher education to promote positive life chances for disadvantaged and marginalised groups. They express a wish for a pedagogy *for* hope, for education as a process of cultivation which develops citizens committed to ‘a robust, plural democracy [and to] fighting injustice and working for a better world’ (Grant, 2012: 913). This wish for higher education as a form of redistributive justice perhaps puts us out of step with recent policy shifts towards equity and fairness – shifts which emphasize meritocratic modes of individual achievement, locate aspiration in individual attributes such as resilience and ‘grit’, and downplay structural social factors such as social class, gender inequality and race (Sellar, 2013). How we square these tensions comes, again, down to pragmatic pedagogic choices in the space of the classroom: how we teach (we may ask students to reflect on the question ‘why is my curriculum white?’ for example), how we enact learning (together and co-operatively, not competitively) and how we relate to our students. This final point is the third point of intersection.

Points of Intersection 3: Contesting Differentiation: Collaboration and Collegiality in a Competitive System

Our narratives agree in the need for positive student-teacher relations. Iain sees teachers as co-learners with students, so that sharing measurement imperatives with them is perceived as something we do with them as well as for them. In similar vein, the other four narratives emphasise the potential for collaboration between students and lecturers as co-inquirers in knowledge-production. Such views contest individualisation and competitiveness, and provide an alternative to the input-output model lamented by Sayer (2014) and referred to earlier. The narratives offer concrete examples of pedagogic practices where collaborative relations can and do occur and

take hold. Measurement imperatives in such contexts are not redundant but they do not take centre stage. Indeed, academic practices which embed and promote collaborative student-lecturer relations might be seen as a small but important push back against the student-as-consumer discourse, and the valorisation of teaching metrics that underpin it. Interestingly, despite the concerted policy efforts to reshape teaching as a service oriented to delivery of a ‘value for money’ commodity (learning or knowledge), there is some evidence that lecturers’ commitment to dialogic working with students shows little sign of diminishing (Taylor and McCaig, 2014), although the fears that a degree is only worth what it yields in monetary terms (future employment) is a matter of concern in Damien’s narrative.

The flip side of this is how to maintain collegial staff relations in an intensely competitive system? The fears that measurement imperatives give rise to increasingly punitive institutional cultures are widespread across the sector but does not feature heavily in our narratives. What our narratives point to is that, just as we collectively desire the best of our students, we also want the best for our colleagues. The impulse towards collegiality is, it seems, alive and well although it is perhaps a more fraught process than previously. As Jean’s and Damien’s narratives show, the allocation of finite resources is a zero-sum game: some courses win, some wither away, as managers seek to balance the desire for efficiencies with what is possible and achievable. Maintaining collegiality can be one of the key things which make harsh situations more bearable. The backdrop to these local acts of resource rationing is the wider push to institutional differentiation: the need to gain competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* similar courses, departments, faculties and institutions; and the need to brand and market ourselves so that ‘we’ can ‘attract’ the students as customer-consumer. Differentiation works by producing winners and losers. In which case, the simple act of ‘looking out for each other’ can be a source of positive affirmation of a greater good.

Conclusion

The five narratives in this chapter offer different takes on measurement imperatives arising from five different staff biographies and academic trajectories. The narratives speak back and forth to each other, as their authors disagree on some things while

agreeing on others. They do not offer one smooth story. Instead, they demonstrate the power of a narrative approach to provide access to specific, unique accounts of lived experience of measurement imperatives. The accounts offer insights into the complex, multiple and heterogeneous ways in which measurement imperatives are taken up and play out in different ways in the contexts in which they arise. The narratives articulate the tensions arising from discourses of marketization, equity and differentiation and how these tensions impact on academic and pedagogic practice. As such, they are an instance of how the sociological imagination can be put to work to support Mill's (1959: 3) contention that 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both'.

Raewyn Connell (2013) makes the following powerful point: Why do market 'reforms' persistently increase inequality? The short answer is that they are intended to.' She was speaking of Australian schools but the point is pertinent to English higher education at the current time. Measurement imperatives are part of the panoply of discursive practices which set competition and performativity at the heart of higher education teaching and learning. Academic responses to this vary widely. As we have seen in this chapter, measurement imperatives pose a range of challenges and opportunities, some are perceived as negative while some work as a spur to more creative engagements with our students and our colleagues.

References

- Ashwin, P. (2017) *Making sense of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) results*. Centre for Global Higher Education.
http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/86901/1/making_sense_of_the_tef.pdf
- Ball, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215-228.
- Bennett, R. and Kane, S. (2014) Students interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the National Student Survey. *Quality in Higher Education* 20 (2): 129-164.
- Boliver, V. (2016) Lies, damned lies, and widening access to Russell Group universities. *Radical Statistics* 114: 29-38.

- Boud, D. and Falchikov, N. (2006) Aligning assessment with long-term learning. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31 (4): 399-413.
- Buckley, A. (2014) *UK Engagement Survey 2014 The Second Pilot Year*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Connell, R. (2013) Why do market 'reforms' persistently increase inequality? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34 (2): 279-285.
- Deem, R. (2001) 'Globalism, new managerialism, academic capitalism and entrepreneurialism in universities: is the local dimension important?' *Comparative Education* 37(1): 7-20.
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2014) *A Thousand Plateaus- Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Diamond, A., Vorley, T., Roberts, J. and Jones, S. (2012) *Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Donavan, M.S., Bransford, J.D. and Pellegrino, J.W. (1999) *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*. Available online at: http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=9457
- Egginton, W. (2016) *Comfort Conservatism and Humanities Education*.
- Fielding, M. (2001) Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change* 2: 123-141
- Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1994) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Continuum.
- Giroux, H. (2003) Public pedagogy and the politics of resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35 (1): 5-16.
- Grant, C. (2012) Cultivating flourishing lives: A robust social justice vision of education. *American Educational Research Journal* 49 (5): 910-934.
- Harris-Evans, J. (2017) *A Homage to Services Lost, Risk, Young People and Outdoor Education*. Sheffield Hallam University. Unpublished EdD thesis.
- hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge.

- Jenkins, R. (2000) Disenchantment, enchantment and re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium. *Max Weber Studies* 1: 11-32.
- Jerrim, J. (2011) Do UK Higher Education students overestimate their starting salary? *Fiscal Studies - the Journal of Applied Public Economics*, 483-509.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013) 'Stakes is high': Educating new century students. *The Journal of Negro Education* 82 (2): 105-110.
- Latour, B. (2004) Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2): 225-248.
- MacAllister, J. (2016) What should educational institutions be for?, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64 (3): 375-391.
- MacIntyre, A. (2013) How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary: Ethics, resistance and Utopia. In P. Blackledge and K. Knight (Eds) *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Madriga, M. and Goodley, D. (2010) Moving beyond the minimum: socially just pedagogies and Asperger's syndrome in UK higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14 (2), 115-131.
- McNay, I. (2015) *Learning from the UK Research Excellence Framework: ends and means in research quality assessment, and the reliability of results in Education*. *Higher Education Review*, 47 (3): 24-47.
- Mills, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Naidoo, R. (2011) Rethinking development: Education and the new imperialism. In *Handbook on Globalization and Higher Education*, (eds.) R. Kong, S. Marginson and R. Naidoo, 40-59. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Naidoo, R. and Whitty, G. (2014) Students as consumers: Commodifying or democratising learning? *International Journal of Chinese Education* 2 (2): 212-240.
- NatCen Social Research (2014) *Review of the National Student Survey*. London: Institute of Education; NatCen; Institute for Employment Studies.
- Pusser, B. and Marginson, S. (2013) University rankings in critical perspective. *Journal of Higher Education* 84(4): 544-568.
- Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sayer, A. (2011) *Why Things Matter To People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sellar, S. (2013) Equity, markets and the politics of aspiration in Australian higher education, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34 (2): 245-258.
- Sclater, N., Peasgood, A. and Mullan, J. (2016) *Learning Analytics in Higher Education: A review of UK and international practice*. Bristol: JISC.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat - The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Taylor, C. and Bovill, C. (2017) Towards an ecology of participation: Process philosophy and co-creation of higher education curricula. *European Education Research Journal*. Published Online: [10.1177/1474904117704102](https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904117704102)
- Taylor, C. and Harris-Evans, J. (2016) Reconceptualising transition to higher education with Deleuze and Guattari. *Studies in Higher Education*. Published online. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1242567>
- Taylor, C. and McCaig, C. (2014) *Evaluating the impact of number controls, choice and competition: An analysis of the student profile and the student learning environment in the new higher education landscape*. York: HEA.
- Thelwall, M. (2014) *Five recommendations for using alternative metrics in the future UK Research Excellence Framework*. *Impact of Social Sciences Blog*.
- Unison. (2016) *The Damage - A Future at Risk, Cuts in Youth Services*. London: Unison.
- Wallace, S. (2014) When you're smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 38 (3): 346-360.
- Wilsdon, J. (2015) *The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management*. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/metrictide/>