The Life of Language and Learning Academics in the Measured University

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Academic Language and Learning (ALL) is a relatively recent practice field, also referred to in Higher Education (HE) as Academic Skills Advising or Student Learning Support. While the precise nature of ALL work remains contested, it generally involves educational programs aiming to develop HE students’ language and learning abilities. Changing social, political and economic circumstances shape the work of ALL academics in complex and often contradictory ways (Percy, 2011). Of crucial current significance is the transformation of HE into the ‘measured university’: an institution preoccupied with the measurement of educational outcomes (Biesta, 2010).

This paper explores the effects of the measured university on ALL academics, particularly its imposition of an ‘evidence-based’ regime of serial evaluations claiming to measure ALL ‘interventions’ and to provide ‘evidence’ of impact on student ‘success’. Following Biesta (2007, 2010) and Hammersley (2004), the paper argues that the discourses of evaluation and evidence-based practice (EEBP) in ALL, legitimised by positivistic epistemologies, entail a means-to-end view of ALL educational practice: reducing it to a set of techniques, limiting investigation to ‘what works’, and discounting normative professional judgments. These EEBP discourses are furthermore infused with neoliberal ideology. Under the guise of the truth, objectivity and progress of techno-scientific evidence, neoliberalism enforces the commodification of HE through promoting market principles; exploits the trope of individual responsibility (Wacquant, 2010) in generalising a precarious wage labour (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001); and multiplies disciplinary panoptic surveillance through new managerialism technologies (Davies, 2003; St Clair & Belzer, 2007) threatening democratic participation in HE decision-making (Biesta, 2010). Thus conceptualised, the measured university provides ALL with some pleasures, many paradoxes and a central neoliberal politics gravely affecting ALL academics and HE students. Following Biesta’s educational philosophy, the paper calls for the replacement of ALL preoccupations with EEBP in favour of more central questions regarding the educational purpose of ALL thereby enabling a more radical and meaningful re-imagining of our work.

References


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