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Time, space and the 'politics of we' in a de-boundaried occupation: the case of careers advisers in England

Helen Colley

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

Background

A major aspect of global lifelong learning policies has been a shift towards joined-up governance and, regarding concerns about social cohesion, multi-agency working. This indicates one of the key concepts for this international symposium, that of working within, through and across occupational boundaries.

This paper discusses the case of career guidance in the English 14-19 sector. Traditionally, careers advisers employed within a discrete, specialist careers service have given universal support to young people, not only in making career decisions to negotiate complex and fragmented transitions from school to work, but also in learning career management skills demanded by the increasing individualisation of responsibility for lifelong learning. However, from 1997 the New Labour administration first 'refocused' this work to target so-called 'disaffected' youth; and then subsumed careers services whole-scale into a new generic youth support service, Connexions, alongside other practitioners drawn from youth work and different social services. The government also declared a new profession of 'personal advisers' to mentor disadvantaged young people and broker support services for them, and all practitioners in Connexions were designated thus. The main target for Connexions is to reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), but there is evidence (DCSF, 2005; Lewin et al, 2009) that it is seriously under-resourced, and provision of career guidance has become considerably restricted.

Research Questions

The paper focuses, then, on a policy experiment which goes beyond multi-agency working to pursue the formation of a multi-occupational profession. What happens when an established occupation is, in its entirety, levered by policy out of a dedicated infrastructure, radically repositioned vis-à-vis other human service occupations, ascribed a generic rather than specialist identity, and required to undertake work beyond the boundaries of its traditional expertise? How does a de-anchored occupation respond to the dissolution of established boundaries in a diffused occupational terrain?

The paper further considers how the rhythms of time and spatial organisation of working life are altered. How is practitioners' time put to use? How do practitioners 'make time' to do the educational work they believe matters? Where and with whom do they work, and how are they positioned in these encounters? What invisible work - such as ethical or emotional labour - is entailed? What issues of stress or de-skilling arise? These questions are heightened by the lack of resources for Connexions, which creates constant tensions for practitioners between the quantity of their caseloads/tasks and the quality of their practice, as they try to support young people for lifelong learning.

Methods

The research, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, draws its data primarily from narrative 'career history' interviews with 17 personal advisers, originally trained as careers advisers, each employed in one of 3 Connexions services in the North of England; and with 9 careers advisers who had worked in Connexions, but quit because of disagreements with its policies and practices. I also draw on data from time-use diaries completed by the personal advisers over two weeks. These diaries include not only quantitative items about the 'budgetting' of time for different activities, but also qualitative items about the degree of specialisation and satisfaction associated with each activity (cf. Gershuny & Sullivan 1998; Michelson, 2005). In addition, further data is drawn from interviews with senior managers in the three case study services, and from policy documents about the role of Connexions personal advisers.

The analysis and interpretation of these data pays particular attention, as do Neimeyer and Henriksson, to the interplay of macro-level policies on a global and national scale with micro-level practices and social interactions in the workplace, as well as the mediating role of meso-level institutional arrangements and regulations.

Frame

The paper seeks to engage in the 'grounded globalisation' research strategy which is the basis of this symposium and of Seddon's paper. It draws on labour process theory, in particular on theories of alienation (Allman, 1999; Brook, 2006, 2009), to explore the consequences of contradictions within educational workers' own existence as labour power (i.e. the human made capital), and the irresolvable conflicts often set in motion for educators by tensions between the quantity and quality of their work (Rikowski, 2002). Whilst alienation can result in painful psychological difficulties (Hochschild, 1989), it can also provoke a reflexivity that challenges the conditions that create it, producing resistance and subversion at individual and collective levels, creating 'spaces of orientation' (Haug, 2009) and stimulating a 'politics of we'.

Time is a crucial element of such an analysis, not least because it forms a key dimension in which labour power is expended and alienation experienced. Drawing on feminist and other critical theorisations of time (Adams, 1989; Bourdieu, 1992; Chanter, 2001) enables us to understand occupational transitions beyond the all too often asymmetric rubric of change-over-time, where change is addressed but time is not. They may then be viewed as a process of change in particular times, that is to say, in particular epochs, periods, or moments, and mediated by the gendered, racialised and classed practices which engender those times (Colley, 2007).

Research findings

This national case study contributes to a global understanding of the reconfiguration of teaching occupations by examining practitioners' responses to a radical de-anchoring and disruption of their profession imposed by specific, national lifelong learning policies. It reveals the internal contradictions of educational work to promote social inclusion within the context of increased economic competitiveness and cuts in education and welfare services - work that entails difficult and unrecognised emotional and ethical labour. In particular, it reveals the way in which these contradictions are expressed within the labour power - that is, the personhood - of the practitioner her/himself - through processes of alienation, compliance and resistance. This points not only to the potential for individual agency, but also to the possibilities for fabricating collectivities, however partial or temporary, in pursuit of a moral and political project of supporting young people in socially just ways. (988 words)