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Research, citizenship, and being accountable.

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Background

Questions regarding the impact and benefit of research are playing an increasing role in how academics in all fields are asked to understand their work. In the UK, the addition of statements on 'impact' and 'benefit' to Research Council applications and the proposal that 25% of the grading by the Research Excellence Framework will be based on impact have brought this issue into the public domain. A recent debate hosted by the Times Higher Education magazine brought together the two poles of the debate. On the one hand academics such as James Ladyman (a professor of philosophy) and John Allen (a professor of biochemistry) oppose impact being used to determine research funding at all and are signatories to petitions set up on the Downing Street website and by the Universities and Colleges Union. They argue that research excellence should be the only measure and that to judge on the basis of impact imposes on academic freedom in the way that it calls for justification and shapes the sort of research academics will pursue. On the other hand are those who argue that if we wish to receive public funds we must be accountable for them. Not all in support of the REF are as blunt as Kathy Sykes who took part in the debate: "We have to wake up and smell the coffee ... if we can't show our relevance, we may not have any future funding." (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=409514>). Sykes comment does however express the anxiety over the competitive nature of research funding and the need to find a way to express ourselves that meets research council requirements.

Research Questions

The demand for the forms of accountability illustrated by the concern with impact and benefit and the gradings that result from exercises such the REF can be seen in the wider context of neo-liberal modes of governance, which have seen a shift to privatized models of management focused on the self-government of the individual. As Ranson (2003) has put it, this has been a shift 'from accountability being a "general expectation" to being a process of increasing specification and regulation, and from being conceived as "an event" to being embodied as a disposition' (Ranson, 2003, p.168). Particular forms of accountability operate today not only in the professional sphere but throughout our lives as constitutive of a mode of subjectivation (Foucault, 1994).

Ranson argues that the shift to an individualist focus erodes the 'conception of the public good as collective good determined through democratic participation, contestation and judgement in the public sphere' (Ranson, 2003, p.170). He argues that a restoration of trust in public institutions is necessary, which requires that 'citizens are included in the public space, and their voice heard in public deliberations' (Ranson, 2003, p.170). In advocating a shift towards giving voice and enabling dialogue, however, Ranson echoes the language of current policy and practice. Dialogue and voice now form a central part of the way in which we are governed and govern ourselves as citizens and how public and private organisations evidence their own accountability to citizens.

Methods

Following Foucault's account of governmentality and related literature (e.g. Rose, 1999; Masschelein and Simons, 2002), I outline the ways in which the active learning citizen is produced today with reference to European educational and cultural policy. 'Active citizenship' is understood in policy as a set of competences (<http://crell.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ActiveCitizenship/AC-Final%20Report-December%202006/measuring%20AC.pdf>) of which having a voice (particular forms of participation and inclusion) is part. I will illustrate how the concern with voice and dialogue operates in the construction of the European citizen, not only in policy and technologies for participation (e.g. The EU's Your Voice in Europe portal; the BBC's Have Your Say website) but also in educational practices

(for example, the learning journal and blog are now used as formal learning tools) and in research itself (for example, the use of life history and autoethnographic methodologies). I will illustrate how the way in which we are asked to account for ourselves produces a particular form of subjectivity and argue that this has implications for democracy that undermine the claims of policy.

Frame

In the polarized debate ensuing from the REF proposals, the emphasis lies in whether or not we should be asked to account for ourselves. Instead I wish to ask how we might respond differently to the call to account for ourselves. This is not to reject the demand for accountability, but to examine the very idea in ways that are more appropriate to the activities in question. I propose to explore the idea of voice in relation to notions of giving an account or oneself, of being accountable in one's words, and hence of voice. Thus I will explore the different mode of accounting for ourselves found in the work of Stanley Cavell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Here the emphasis is placed on the ethical, in the Foucauldian sense of the relation of the self to itself. Voice in the literature considered here relates not only to speech or writing and having an opinion but to one's articulation of oneself in thought, language and action. It therefore provides a critique of the governmentalised understanding of citizenship and voice explored above.

Research findings

In conclusion I will return to consider the question of accountability in academia by suggesting that a response to the latest demands must take the form not of a question of submission to them or refusal of them but a response in which we question ourselves. I will consider how the philosophy of education might articulate itself.