

If you are not going to pay me in credit points, I will not fill in the questionnaire! The making of the student subject in neoliberal academia

Anna Carreri

University of Verona, Italy; Hasselt University, Belgium
anna.carreri@univr.it; anna.carreri@uhasselt.be

Patrizia Zanoni

Hasselt University, Belgium; Utrecht University, the Netherlands
patrizia.zanoni@uhasselt.be; p.zanoni@uu.nl

Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, a rich critical literature has emerged on the effects of New Public Management (NPM) on academia (Chandler et al., 2002; Davies, Bansel, 2007; Deem, 1998; Lorenz, 2012; Olssen, Peters, 2005; Prichard, Willmott, 1997; Steger, Roy, 2010; Willmott, 1995). Referring to neoliberal policies which are adopted in order to reshape the academic world on the blueprint of a market, NPM controls academics through practices that foster hyper-competition including temporary contracts increasing job insecurity, funding pressures, and performance accountability measures (e.g. audits, rankings, and research assessments) (Ball, 2016; Clarke et al., 2012; Larner, Le Heron, 2005; Nikunen, 2014; Thomas, Davies, 2002).

This literature has emphasized that these practices do not only increase the workload of academics but also at once exert control by enjoining individuals into self-definitions, identities and social relations aligned with the neoliberal norms of individualized efficiency and performativity (Ball, 2012; Brunila, 2016), accountability towards multiple audiences (Frølich, 2011; Roberts, 2009; Zanoni, De Coster, 2016), academic entrepreneurship (Brunila 2012; Nikunen, 2014), and flexibility (Knights, Clarke, 2014). Once so redefined, academic subjects enforce control through self-regulation on the one hand (Foucault, 2008; McKinlay, Pezet, 2017) and come to undermine collegiality and collective resistance on the other (Davies, Petersen, 2005).

Whereas we have a rich knowledge of the changing working conditions and subjectivities of professors and other academic actors, the literature has to date addressed less how NMP has changed university students, with the exception of few studies on the increasing consumer orientation to academic study (Tomlinson, 2017; Williams, 2012; Woodall et al., 2014). Yet the neoliberalization of academia – as part of the neoliberalization of society at large – has not left student subjectivities unaffected. Since neoliberal university is expected to provide the student with a tertiary education that is increasingly understood as a commodity to use in a changing, insecure and competitive labour market, graduate students' professional outcomes are seen as empirical evidence of its increased employability and labour market preparedness. At the same time, as students' educational performance and experiences (including numbers, duration to completion, scholarships, etc.) are themselves used as key measures of university performance, students have themselves increasingly become a means to access resources (Larner, Le Heron, 2005).

This paper relies on critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, Wodak, 1997) to explore how and with what consequences neoliberal discourses and governance practices have affected students' understanding of themselves, their opportunities and desires during the academic life period, as well as how university administrative and academic staff understand them. Specifically, it contributes to the extant literature on neoliberal academia by answering the following two questions: 1) How is the neoliberal discourse of higher education reshaping students' subjectivity? 2) How is students' subjectivity in neoliberal academia affecting the nature, status and function of university knowledge?

The questions are addressed empirically through the qualitative data collected in a large mixed-methods case study of a university of medium size in the north of Italy aimed at exploring the quality of life of students. The topics investigated include the impact of recent neoliberal reforms and new governance practices on students' lives, their needs and expectations in regard to teaching, to other university services, and more generally to academic life. Data was collected through 49 semi-structured interviews with key informants, lasting around 1.5 hours, including university students (n = 16), administrative personnel (n = 14), teachers (n = 12), and staff of agencies that interact closely with university and provide services for students (n = 7); 1 focus group with 5 students' representatives lasting 2 hours; a large amount of open comments left by the students at the end of 2,867 on-line questionnaires; and ethnographic notes taken by the first author during fieldwork in the period October 2016 – March 2017.

A preliminary analysis of the data shows how students' subjectivity is constructed in terms of individualized market relationships in four distinct ways: 1) the student as a producer of recognizable and instrumental outputs in times decided by someone else; 2) the student no longer as an active knower but as a consumer of education, which is reconceived as interchangeable information; 3) the student as an individualistic and not collective subject best fitted for a docile neoliberal society; 4) the student as a vulnerable subject to the extent it is hyper-responsible and an autonomous entrepreneur of itself.

Through the close examination of the discourses through which different academic actors take students up as the newly appropriate subjects to neoliberal society, the paper contributes to advance understandings of the processes of students' subjectification as well as of related neoliberal modes of (self-)governance, which are empirically poorly explored in the literature. Moreover, from a critical organizational perspective which draws on Foucauldian understandings (McKinlay, Pezet, 2017), and specifically on the concept of governmentality (Foucault, 2008), we discuss how this re-configuration of university students' subjectivity in turn contributes to changing the way knowledge is assumed to function in universities and how neoliberal discourse parasitizes students' academic life perverting its original meanings.

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