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"I'm nobody's Mum in this university": The gendering of work around student writing in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

A number of recent studies have raised critical questions about the gendering of academic labour in the contemporary university as workplace. This paper focuses on gendering discourses of work around student writing which surfaced in an ethnographically oriented study of fourteen academic teacher participants based in six diverse UK Universities in a range of disciplines. I draw on study findings to show that work with undergraduate writing and writers is often understood through feminising discourses of 'care' which explicitly and implicitly invoke stereotypically female caring roles in ways which reflect and perpetuate the marginalised status of writing work and at the same time infantilise students. I argue that the reassertion of care as a core academic value is necessary to counter such feminising discourses because such a reassertion challenges an unhelpful dichotomous separation between academic knowledge-making on one hand, and student writing as a personal issue on the other.

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1. Introduction

As higher education has made the transition from elite to mass education system, the nature of academic life and work in the UK has changed profoundly (Ball, 2003; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Evans, 2004; Lea & Stierer, 2011; see Preece, this issue). Far from nostalgic notions of academic life as a release from the mundane realities of work, questions of escalating academic workloads (Hey, 2001; Morley, 2003, pp. 93–99; Gill, 2014), the accelerated academy (Ylijoki, Henriksson, Kallioniemi-Chambers, & Hokka, 2013) and a "24/7 culture of availability" (Lynch, 2010, p. 63) are much to the fore. A number of authors have argued that there has been a reluctance on the part of academics to examine the "conditions of their own production" (Hey, 2001: abstract; see also; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005); however, in this changing climate, greater attention is being paid to academic life as labour in the sociological sense (Gill, 2014), including a growing body of research investigating how academics' working lives and opportunities intersect with gender. For example, Leathwood and Read (2009) argue that, despite moral panics about the increasing representation of women in higher education, academic life and success is still strongly predicated on an academic identity which assumes few or no responsibilities beyond work and almost unlimited time to devote to it. This, they contend, profoundly disadvantages women who are still subject to a 'care imperative', since they continue to disproportionately bear the burden of caring for children and elderly dependants and for management of the domestic sphere (see also Acker, 2012; Clegg, 2008; Clegg, Rowland, Mann, Davidson, & Clifford, 2004; Lynch, 2010). An increasing lack of clear boundaries between private and professional academic life and work has gendered

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effects, where women are particularly disadvantaged by the contradictory demands of two “greedy” institutions, the family and academia (Grummell, Devine, & Lynch, 2009; Currie, Harris and Thiele 2000; Acker & Armenti, 2004). This significantly raises the costs to individual women of a choice to pursue an academic career; for example, many in senior roles choose not to have children (Bailyn, 2003; Grummell et al., 2009; Leathwood & Read, 2009). Women are also disproportionately burdened with what is constructed as a personal responsibility for achieving “work-life balance” and so with the additional work of “sustaining a balance between these two spheres” (Toffoletti and Starr 2016: 498).

Higher education research has tended to focus more on the impact of women academics' culturally imposed responsibility for care outside the university workplace, rather than on their experiences of ‘caring’ within it. However, there has also been some interest in how the ‘care imperative’ might play out within the workplace, for example in gendered divisions of research labour (Hey, 2001; Morley, 1994) and between research, teaching and service (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Acker & Webber, 2013; Misra, Lundquist, & Templer, 2012). This work is echoed in the work of feminist researchers who have foregrounded the related concept of ‘emotional labour’ or ‘emotion work’, often overlooked by traditional sociological research, which they argue is hidden, undervalued and often unevenly distributed between men and women within the academic workplace (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Blackmore, 1996; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Hey, 2001; Hochschild, 2003). These authors are rightly concerned with the inequitable impact of such gendered hierarchies and unfair distributions of work on women’s career progression and on the quality of their working experience within higher education. Collectively they point to the fact that women tend to do the ‘double shift’ – not only across the different domains of work and life/home/family – but also *within* the workplace, taking a disproportionate share of the undervalued work of ‘personal support’ (see McMullan this issue).

However, when notions of ‘care’ and of ‘emotional labour’ migrate to the workplace itself, particularly when applied to the university setting and the labour of knowledge workers such as academics, they require careful and perhaps different theorising on two counts. Firstly, although the focus might sometimes be on caring as a practical and demanding activity mostly done by women (as is most often the case where the competing demands of work and family are at issue), the notion of caring in academia goes beyond this to encompass a professional ethic emphasising “receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness rather than rights and rules” (Salisbury, 2013, p. 53). While this broader construction of caring as an academic value is not devoid of gender-normative associations of ‘nurturing’ as feminine, caring in the academic context is not only a ‘woman’s value’ and its effects on individual women and men are complex (Huyton, 2013). This holistic understanding of ‘care’ encompasses both emotional and intellectual engagement, a teacher’s passionate commitment both to subject and to students.

Secondly, working with students in the conditions of contemporary ‘mass’ higher education throws up deeply ambivalent and contested perspectives on care. Bozalek, Mitchell, Dison and Alperstein (2016) provide a well-developed and useful definition of an ethics of care which they trace by focusing on feedback around written assignments, drawing on Boud and Molloy’s (2013) dialogical framing of feedback and on Tronto’s (1993) political ethics of care. However, the context on which they base their explorations is of a small, close-knit group of participants on a professional development course for higher educators. Under such conditions, caring becomes unambiguously worthwhile, even if it does involve the hard work of ‘caring for’ as well as ‘caring about’ others. However, often caring as a practice in the contemporary academy frequently involves navigating a tricky tension between caregiving as an undervalued and exhausting chore or even as a form of performative “emotional display” (Salisbury, 2013, p. 48) on one hand, and enactment of a deep commitment and engagement on the other. Caring under pressurised conditions becomes a site of contestation, and gendered constructions of academic identity (Clegg, 2010) and professionalism (Murray, 2006) which exclude care as an academic value create tensions and difficulties for both female and male academics who see caring as integral to their role.

Work with student writing connects with a holistic but ambivalent understanding of care for a number of reasons – it is incremental, cyclical and slow, it often takes place in hidden spaces e.g. at home and in personal tutorials, often involves listening, empathy, attention to identities and meanings, and to the ‘whole person’ – the intellectual, emotional and even physical. It is also an exceptionally demanding and time-consuming aspect of the role of academics with teaching responsibilities (particularly in setting, supporting and assessing students’ written work, Tuck, 2012) and frequently straddles, in both time and space, the increasingly blurred boundary between academics’ working and home lives. It is therefore perhaps surprising that few of the authors discussed above who focus on gendered divisions of labour in higher education refer explicitly to this aspect of academic labour. Grummell et al. (2009) make some reference to work activities such as marking which would fall within the category of ‘work with student writing’; Bozalek et al. (2016) focus on care in feedback on written assignments; but writing itself is backgrounded and work with student writing remains an implicit dimension of gendered academic labour in most studies.

However, in language-related higher education fields such as writing development and English for Academic Purposes, some researchers have raised important questions about work in the academy which resonate powerfully with the broader literature on the gendering of academic labour outlined above and which have the potential to speak to the broader field of higher education research in this regard. Turner has described “language work” with students in gendered terms as “Cinderella” work (Turner, 2004, 2011), arguing that the “intellectual rigour and arduous labour” (2011: 31) involved for both students and teachers is rarely recognised. Others have commented on the gendered politics of discrete language support work, for example Blythman and Orr in their ironically entitled 2006 paper: “Mrs Mop Does Magic”. In the US context, possibly due to the significant proportion of women in the domain of Composition as a discrete element in first year higher education (Holbrook, 1991), a substantial literature has emerged which foregrounds issues of gender in relation to compositionists’ work with students’ writing taking place outside the disciplines. For example, Horner (2007: 168) contends that the

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