'Historians don't set out to change people's lives': To what extent are notions of social justice shared across the academy?

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first phase of an ESRC-funded research project aimed at exploring how knowledge is produced and distributed through the writing practices of academics, and how these are shaped by the contemporary context of higher education, including managerialism and research assessment.

As part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and to secure funding from research councils, academics are expected to demonstrate that their work has economic or social impact beyond academia. This 'impact agenda' is one of the ways in which scholarly research may engage with the notion of social justice. However, impact may be more complex in nature than is accounted for in research assessment exercises, and may be interpreted in different ways across different disciplines, with some lending themselves to social justice more readily than others.

The data presented in this paper draws on interviews with academics at three different universities and in three disciplinary areas: Mathematics, History and Marketing. We discuss how they interpret policies requiring them to demonstrate economic and social impact, and how this interacts with their views on the wider role of academics in society.

The findings of the project indicate that there is no unified notion of social justice across the disciplines, and that understandings of this concept, including how easily it can be achieved and the extent to which it is prioritised by the institution, influence the choices academics make in their writing practices. For example, although many of our participants talked about the importance of making their research accessible or "making a difference", the perceived beneficiaries of this included commercial companies and government agencies. Some interpreted impact in terms of financial transparency, seeing this as a form of social justice towards students or taxpayers.

Academic discipline emerged as a complicating factor in understandings of serving society, with impact being seen as more difficult to achieve in some disciplines than others. Furthermore, efforts to engage in social justice-related activities were also at times compromised by competing priorities such as demands on participants' time.

Overall, the findings indicate that the valued forms of knowledge creation in the working lives of our participants are complex and contested. The ways in which social justice is conceptualised by our participants and how it serves as a driver for the choices they make, interact with their disciplinary traditions, their career stage, and personal priorities, as well as how they interpret policy on impact.

Keywords

Academic literacies; academic writing; impact; knowledge; discipline

Background

This paper reports on an ESRC-funded research project entitled 'The Dynamics of Knowledge Creation: Academics' writing practices in the contemporary university workplace'[1] to address issues raised by both Jan McArthur and Jennifer Case's think pieces[2]. By a detailed and close-up exploration of the writing practices of academics in three different disciplines and institutions, the project aims to explore how knowledge is produced and distributed through academics' writing practices, and how these are shaped by the contemporary context of higher education, including managerial practices and evaluation frameworks.

We examine how academics across different disciplines and institutions interpret policies requiring them to demonstrate economic and social impact, and how this interacts with their views on the wider role of academic work in society. Addressing both McArthur's and Case's think pieces, we discuss whether some disciplines lend themselves to social justice more than others, and whether there is a unified and unifying notion of social justice, or serving society, across the disciplines and participants of our study.

Case states in her think piece that:
> [a] social justice stance on higher education provides the starting point for an important critique recognizing that the purposes of education have been captured by a narrow view which sees these predominantly in instrumental and economic terms, focusing attention on issues of efficiency with educational outcomes characterised in 'evidence-based' terms.

The marketised view of higher education discussed by Case has contributed to a weakened commitment to higher education as a transformative or emancipatory experience for students (Beetham, 2016). Thus, much of the research on education and social justice has focused issues such as access to and participation in higher education (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009), and the role of assessment in facilitating social justice (McArthur, 2015). However, managerialism and commercialization have also had an impact on the work of academics, the majority of which is mediated through writing. In this paper, we argue that research by academics, and the scholarly writing associated with it, are coming under similar pressures to those experienced by higher education as a whole (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007) and that understandings of social justice are influenced by the competing and sometimes contradictory pressures academics experience with regard to their writing. Furthermore, notions of what counts as social justice also vary across disciplines, as do the ways in which individual academics attempt to address it.

The treatment of higher education as a kind of global marketplace means that students are often positioned as customers and knowledge is viewed as a commodity that can be quantified via rankings (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2011), National Student Survey (NSS) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) scores at the level of institutions, and citation indices and grant income at the level of individual academics. As Taylor points out, this context rewards academics for their measurable "outputs" and encourages an orientation towards entrepreneurialism and career mobility rather than social justice (Taylor, 2016).

One specific change brought about as part of the REF and in order to secure funding from research councils is that academics are expected to demonstrate that their work has economic or social impact beyond academia. This 'impact agenda' is one of the ways in which scholarly research may engage with the notion of social justice. However, some have argued that impact is more complex and cumulative in nature than is accounted for in research assessment exercises (Ashwin, 2016), which tend to focus on direct, relatively short-term and measurable effects which can be clearly linked to specific publications. Furthermore, impact may be interpreted in different ways across different disciplines (Cruickshank, 2015), with some lending themselves to social justice and the kind of critique Case argues for more readily than others.

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[1] See http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/acadswriting/about for more information.
[2] Case: *Higher education and social justice: Asking the 'education questions', and McArthur: From Close-Up to Far, Far Away: the mediating role of social justice*

The data reported in this paper comes from phase one of the *Dynamics of Knowledge Creation* project, which entailed three interviews each with a total of 14 academics working at three different universities in the UK. Participants represent three disciplinary areas: Mathematics, History and Marketing, and include 6 professors, 3 senior lecturers, and 5 lecturers. We take a broadly social practice approach to literacy, in which reading and writing are seen as practices developed and maintained within their social contexts, and shaped by aspects of people's purposes, histories and institutional positionings (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 2007). In this sense, the research considers the interaction between policy frameworks and the values and practices of the academics who work within them.

How our participants do social justice

In Case's think piece, she sees the purpose of education as linked to Amartya Sen's notion of "Human flourishing" (Sen, 2009). Many of our participants expressed similar views about the purpose of their research, talking about the importance of making their research accessible or "making a difference" to people's lives. For example, Diane, a professor in Marketing said,

> A lot of my work is engaged research, so I think I do make a difference to managers' lives.

The relevance of Diane's research to professionals outside of academia may be particularly important to academics like her who work in applied disciplines such as Marketing. Marketing academics across all the sites of our study made the case that their discipline and its work exist in order to apply research in the academy to real-world practice.

Impact beyond academia may also be seen as easier to achieve in some disciplines than others, making academic discipline a complicating factor in understandings of serving society. Ian, a lecturer in Pure Mathematics, for example, when asked about his approach to impact, said,

> I mean, for mathematicians, hardly anybody can understand what our research is about.

Ian did not engage with social media to disseminate his research findings or reach out to society beyond his disciplinary community, nor did he feel that the impact agenda was an important driver for his research and associated writing. This view was, however, by no means universal across this discipline. At the more applied end of the discipline, Robert, a professor in Applied Mathematics, saw promoting mathematical knowledge in society in general as an important part of his role. For him this involved both policy-level decision making and writing maths books aimed at non-experts:

> I've been vice president of Institute X and so there's a policy side of what I do as well. I also do popular maths things. I see that all as part of the same job.

While Robert felt that universities had a social responsibility to communicate beyond academia, the extent to which this responsibility could or should be taken on by any individual academic was influenced by their career trajectory, as he elaborates in this comment:

> It's not exactly something that you would encourage a starting lecturer to do because there are just too many things and you've got to establish yourself in various ways. Once you've reached a certain age, it's not a bad thing to be thinking about explaining maths. Also trying to get the next generation of mathematicians engaged and interested.

In this sense, only towards the end of his career, when he has already established a track record of high-status publications did Robert feel relieved of the need to prove himself and free to pursue more social-justice oriented goals. The tension between career and social justice orientations is also evident from the perspective of an academic in the middle of his career in the following comment by James, a lecturer in Marketing:

> My humble little collection of work, such as it is, the only life I really expect it to affect or alter is mine in a professional sense. You've written enough articles, at some point maybe get promoted or do this or do that or you'll be REF-able, or you won't be REF-able, this kind of thing.

These comments illustrate the influence of what Wilsdon (2016) calls "cultures of counting" on what is valued by institutions and, in turn, prioritised by academics. In other words, because academics must produce a certain number of publications of a certain calibre in order to keep their job or obtain promotion, they feel compelled to focus on these individual career goals at the expense of goals directed at their desire to make a difference to society.

Additionally, the extent to which social justice was a driver for academics' decisions regarding their research was influenced not only by their career trajectory, but also by their disciplinary background. This was not always a straightforward matter of the academic department our participants worked in, and had much to do with how they conceptualised their research within its disciplinary context. For example, James, who worked in an applied discipline (Marketing), but whose PhD was in History, explained,

> I don't start off a research project with the thought of, 'How is it going to affect people today?' Part of that is because I was trained as a historian. Historians don't set out to change people's lives in the same way that a social worker might, even here in the school a marketing person might do.

Although historians may not set out with the aim of changing the world, they may find themselves writing about aspects of history that are relevant to global issues today. One of our participants, a professor of History, found himself being approached by the media to write on current events relating to social justice because these intersected with his own historical specialism. While he was keen to get involved in this and talked about the difference this might make to the debate given the reach such journalistic writing would have, he also expressed concern that it conflicted with other demands on his time:

> The university is committed to something called social responsibility. Well, I am very happy to sign up to that … I think we are citizens. If we have something worthwhile that we think we can contribute, then I think we should do that. It's just that it is extra and it's quite demanding, and I wouldn't like it to take over my writing life.

Colin's comment indicates that although he values social responsibility, he sees it as an additional burden on top of the work already prioritised by his institution. Social responsibility is thus seen as secondary to his existing work, which included, in his view, a duty to his students and colleagues, rather than embedded within it as an intrinsic element of what he does.

As noted above, many academics talked about the importance of achieving things they valued, which included doing what they called "actionable" research that could change society for the better. However, the perceived beneficiaries of these changes included not only students or disadvantaged groups, but also in some cases commercial companies and government agencies. Gareth, a Mathematician commented,

> … all my research is very driven by impact, a lot of things … I write joint papers with people from Oil Company X; I write joint papers with people from the Met Office.

Others interpreted impact in terms of financial transparency, seeing it as a form of social justice towards students or taxpayers. Robert, a mathematician, said,

> It's an accountability thing. If you're paid through public money than I think part of the duty is then to try to engage with the public about what the money is used for.

The priorities of the institution and the availability of funding opportunities also played a role in academics' understandings of which communities could be served by the social justice agenda. For example, Mark, a lecturer in Marketing at a post-1992 university was interested in doing research into improving teaching and learning for Chinese students, but said,

> Because they [his institution] were working to their targets … my topic area had very little interest. So if it was looking at underachieving white males from lower social areas in Area X in England, they would have jumped on that, because there was some funding relating to that.

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This demonstrates that the factors driving the ways in which social justice is understood and the research agenda directed at addressing it go beyond both the intellectual interests of individual academics and their particular disciplinary traditions, and also encompass institutional strategies in response to policy.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings indicate that the valued forms of knowledge creation in the working lives of our participants are complex and contested. No unified notion of social justice across the disciplines emerged, nor did any single understanding of how this might be achieved. The ways in which social justice is conceptualised by the participants in our study, and the extent to which serving society is a driver for the choices they make interact with a number of factors. These include their disciplinary traditions, their career trajectories, their personal priorities and aspirations as well as how they interpret policy on impact. The extent to which the work of academics advances the cause of social justice is not fully determined by them as individuals despite their purported autonomy in setting their own research agenda, but is shaped in part by wider forces including pressures regarding workloads and priorities, and dominant discourses around what counts as success for individual academics. These factors ultimately influence the choices academics make in their writing practices.

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