

CURRERE, CUPS OF TEA, AND CURSES

NAVIGATING THE NEOLIBERAL LABYRINTH OF A CAREER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Six years ago, I gave a lecture on the historical evolution of the UK's higher education (HE) system to a group of first year undergraduate students at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Wales. The session came in the aftermath of a professional upheaval, having taken voluntary redundancy from a previous job, and tracked both the growth and gradual erosion of the system from the 19th-century to that day. At times, the tone of the lecture was sharply critical of the neoliberal political long-game, angry at its consequences for those within the system, and unflinchingly passionate in its desire to preserve something of Newman's (1859/1996) *The Idea of a University*. A small group of highly engaged students approached me at the end of the lecture, wanting to ask questions. They understood the overarching narrative about the development of the system, but one of the group took my breath away by asking, "Has it changed students?" I will return to this question later.

The dynamic between the HE system and the people within it has fascinated me throughout the course of my nearly 25-year career in academia. Agitated ruminations over cups of tea, watching droplets of condensation bead down café windows in stormy seaside locations, has prompted many conversations about and reflections on how my understanding of HE has often been profoundly at odds with the reality of working in the sector. My deep-seated unease with the evolution of the system has lurked, like a dark spectre—an uncomfortable misalignment of value systems that often generates inner conflict.

Engaging in *currere*, which I view as a structured form of reflective practice, provides a useful framework within which to attempt to disentangle the feelings of cognitive dissonance so frequently felt during the everyday "doing" of my job. Partly, my sense of inner conflict is rooted in my positionality as a working-class Welsh woman and the first in my family to obtain a university degree. One consequence of this foundation was and is a genuine conviction in the transformative potential of education, alongside a general sense of naivety about the power-dynamics within the HE hierarchical system, the significance of social capital, and the existence of a meritocracy. In parallel with a self who perpetually questions the legitimacy of the system, the myriad reshaping forces of external pressures have often resulted in an unsettling combination of frustrated weariness, crippling despondency, flashes of renewed energy, and a stubborn optimism that positive change may still be possible.

CURRERE AND "DOING AGENCY"

"Doing agency" offers a useful starting point in thinking about how it may be possible to maintain one's (true) self whilst navigating the so-called neoliberal labyrinth of HE, because it facilitates an all-important sense of autonomy and professional integrity. Drawing on Schwab (1969), Smith (2022) frames the "achievement of agency" in terms of "choice and action," which, in turn, lead to "defensible decisions" (p. 107). Whilst Smith connects this specifically with

theories and practices of curriculum and pedagogy, this framing can be extended to include broader organisational infrastructures, policy frameworks, and the political agendas that dictate the nature of the affordances and constraints that are experienced by academics on a daily basis.

During the course of my career, when reflecting on the evolution of the system and trying to manage/accommodate change, I have often felt that these broader agendas to which the sector must speak have inflicted untold damage on what it means to achieve agency, both for academics and their students. Neoliberalism has been evident since the early part of the 20th-century (Bockman, 2013), but its current incarnation is rooted in the 1970s/80s, and is not without its consequences for individuals and organisations (Ball & Olmedo, 2012; Jones & Ball, 2023). One consequence of the ideology is the corporatisation and marketization of universities (Bockman, 2013). This is spun as a necessity to improve efficiencies, ensure value-for-money, hold universities to account across the full spectrum of their core activities, and generate comparable sets of key performance indicators to inform consumer choice-making (Collini, 2012). The irony, however, is that it undermines the very things for which HE should stand, such as pushing boundaries, being creative, and generating new knowledge. Under a neoliberal regime, teaching and research activities feel reduced, restricted, and homogenised, because their “value” is measured and determined in ways that mainly seek to serve a political agenda.

Smith (2022) draws on Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) definition of agency as the interplay of reproduction and transformation when individuals respond “to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (p. 108), which would arguably include the problems caused by ideological frameworks. Having worked within the HE sector for a lengthy period of time, I have found that agentic “doing” can present constant challenges, because it is informed by a range of different experiences, motivations, intentions, and reactions that shift, change, and build incrementally. Using *currere* as an opportunity to pause and think about one’s own professional timeline can help to build an understanding of the schema and default positions that define one’s personal career-map. This may be re-drawn from week-to-week, month-to-month, and year-to-year, but it can facilitate a form of navigation that builds resilience and enables survival, irrespective of whether professional possibilities may or may not be felt.

Forde (2023) explores “how *currere* can be applied to (re)kindle one’s agency and (re)write one’s self” and positions it quite broadly as an “autobiographical method” (p. 1). My own interpretation is similar in that, through reflective practice (especially journaling), I have sought to address my latent anxiety about the jeopardy of losing myself within a system that does not always align well with my core values and moral compass. Indeed, Smith (2022) extols the benefit of engaging in *currere* as “reflective work centred on the aim of making sense of our values” (p. 109), which can help to reconcile past, present, and future. It is therapeutic to think deeply about one’s feelings in response to the gradual yet perceptible evolution of a problematic system and one’s place within it. HE often demands game-playing, resistance, compliance, and 60-hour working weeks, which can be complex, confusing, exasperating, and exhausting. Long-term reflective practice has enabled me to recognise patterns, make predications, and psychologically prepare, whilst ultimately allowing me to feel able, in some way, to “do agency” and curse less.

NEOLIBERAL COMPLICITY? THINKING ABOUT AND MAKING SENSE OF ONESELF

Smith (2022) presents Pinar’s (1975) four stages of critical self-reflection, to provide a neatly structured approach to *currere*,

1. The Regressive – remembering/re-storying episodes from our past
2. The Progressive – imagining our future
3. The Analytic – analysing and comprehending our “now”
4. The Synthetic – constructing new “knowings” (ways of understanding, being, and acting that enable us to better understand the relationship between choices, actions, and their consequences in working towards desired aims). (p. 108)

My own *curre* account, as presented below, seeks to apply this four-stage process to the mapping of a personal career timeline, in order to make sense of my position within the HE system and to reflect on how my “choices” and “actions” (in response to systemic challenges over a quarter-century) may shed light on my “now.”

THE REGRESSIVE: GREAT OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW?

Forde (2023) notes that “we return to our past experience and examine how it came to constitute our present” (p. 2) but also acknowledges that deeper understanding of self may only be accessible with “the passage of time” (p. 3). This is an important point, because it is often difficult and sometimes too painful to fully comprehend what is happening when one is in the midst of it. Hindsight can be liberating, when dots are joined between past experiences and present challenges, to enable the establishment of new understandings.

My fascination with the design, function, and interplay of systems is unequivocally anchored in my personal experiences. I emerged as a “product” of a particular school system that had thrown my sense of identity into flux (particularly in relation to “Welshness”). Feelings of “injustice” were later (re)contextualised during my undergraduate studies, where I learnt to interrogate policies, question the reasons for change, and understand how and why things evolve in particular ways. Knowledge, in this sense, became a source of inner strength, enabling me to appreciate that, whilst most external factors are out of my own control, they often provide underlying explanations that support sense-making.

At the beginning of my career, the habit of reflective practice was formed early through my initial training as a lecturer in Education. I maintained a punishingly unhealthy schedule for the first seven years in the job, with perfectionist tendencies fuelling brutal self-criticism until an inevitable health crisis forced re-evaluation. In taking a step back, I consciously perceived myself as someone who was very serious about the importance of education and of being a good educator but also acknowledged that the system often (curiously) did not seem to appreciate these attributes. I also felt that, for reasons of self-preservation, I needed to find ways to walk my own path in an authentic and honest way. Gradually, I came to realise that the possibilities for “doing agency” are often hidden within the frameworks of the system; being able to recognise the processes of neoliberalisation can empower one to work around them.

To add to the breadth of my growing understanding of the HE system, I switched disciplines by moving from a School of Education into a Department of Theatre, Film & Television Studies (TFTS). This was an eye-opening culture-shock for a number of reasons but was also the point at which I became aware of the perceived “value” of different disciplines within the neoliberal landscape. Working in Education, I had never needed to defend the legitimacy of the discipline area. However, becoming a lecturer in Media & Communication Studies required frequent counterarguments to accusations of its low value as a so-called “Mickey Mouse” subject.

Indeed, this negative rhetoric persisted under the UK's recent Conservative Government when, in 2023, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak aggressively pledged to "crackdown on rip-off degrees" (UK Government, 2023, n.p.).

It was during my time in TFTS that I came to fully appreciate the horror of neoliberalism and the destructive market forces that are allowed to run unchecked within HE. During a twelve-year timeline, I lived through a perfect boom-and-bust narrative-arc, which has had a profound shaping influence on my perception of the system. When I first joined the Department, the discipline areas were beginning to burgeon in terms of student recruitment, with very few competitor HEIs running similar courses. This triggered pulses of intense pressure during times of over-recruitment and understaffing, with large class-sizes and immense assessment-loads, until a reasonable staff-student ratio was struck. Simultaneously, however, things were changing in the broader HE landscape. In response to "market analyses," other HEIs began to offer similar provision, thus, widening consumer choice and diluting the recruitment pool. Then, prior to the significant increase in student tuition fees in 2012, the university experienced an exceptional year for student recruitment. What followed was a three-year period of assured income-generation from a large body of registered students and a feeling of relative financial stability, which then was gradually overshadowed by an alarming drop in the recruitment of subsequent cohorts as a result of, amongst other factors, higher fees.

I likened this time to watching a tanker appear on the horizon, slowly increasing in size as it journeyed irreversibly towards rocks, with no workable mechanism to change direction because the whole ship had long-since been rendered rudderless by neoliberal reform of the system. Despite efforts to correct the direction of travel, the inevitable consequences of dwindling student recruitment (in the form of restructuring, portfolio rationalisation, and staff redundancy) generated feelings of deeply unsettling dread. My response to this was to financially prepare and wait. When the moment eventually arrived, I opted to "jump ship" by applying for voluntary redundancy and "doing agency" rather than running the risk of drowning in the wreckage. Seven years ago, this narrative-arc felt unusual and unfortunate, but the post-pandemic, post-Brexit, socio-political context of HE in the UK has made this situation routine. In the last year alone, numerous academic colleagues have been "at risk" of redundancy, demonstrating that the business model for HE is little more than basic supply-and-demand.

THE PROGRESSIVE: BLUE-SKY, YET CLOUDY, IDEALISM?

My lengthy account of The Regressive stage in the *currere* process is deliberate, because the experiences I had in the earlier years of my career have powerfully shaped my current thinking. This, in part, explains why I struggle when "looking forward to what is not yet present" (Forde, 2023, p. 4). The Progressive stage in the *currere* process invites us to imagine our future (Pinar, 1975, as cited in Smith, 2022, p. 108), but my experience of redundancy has made me acutely aware that, no matter how good one is at one's job, a professional future is not guaranteed and is, therefore, difficult to conceive. Contemporary commentaries about UK HE present a sector in deep crisis (e.g., Mintz, 2021) with no prospect of constructive government intervention.

My struggles with and huge reservations about sector-change can make it difficult to formulate and/or commit to any long-term plans. Forde (2023) suggests that his tendency to allow himself "only a very limited planning horizon" may, in part, be explained by his "perceived lack of agency" (p. 4). I feel a similar sense of reticence, possibly as a result of working in so-called

low-prestige (arts and humanities) subject-areas, which are often seen (by successive governments and, sometimes, HEI senior management teams) as irrelevant or disposable. In the context of Wales, the political tone relating to attitudes about the role and value of HE became particularly combative during the time when Leighton Andrews was Minister for Education & Skills (2009-13) (see Andrews, 2014). This tone still resonates in contemporary commentaries that seek to draw attention to the contradictions in Welsh governance (e.g., Healy, 2021), and it is challenging to maintain energy whilst trying to wade through the resultant quagmire.

However, engaging with other people's accounts of *currere*—such as Forde (2023)—can be helpful in unlocking common experiences, fears, perceived limitations, and potential solutions. Thus, I dare to dream! In trying to imagine a future HE system and my career within it, I would like to see a (re-)focusing of purpose, to (re-)prioritise teaching and research in ways that permit a sense of autonomy and freedom—where lecturers design their own teaching without interference from those who do not teach, and where researchers shape their own expertise in ways that are not dictated by the distracting “trends” set by external funding agendas.

Furthermore, I imagine recapturing some of the values espoused by Newman (1859/1996), who saw “the University” as the ideal arena for a liberal education—a place to nurture the ability to think and permit freedom of thought, to appreciate education for education's sake (where it is seen as a good in and of itself rather than a means-to-an end), and to have as its ultimate goal the holistic transformation (for the better) of individuals for the long-term benefit of society. I would also like to image a future in which the pace is more measured, to allow ideas to percolate, to create more time for students to make (intellectual) connections, and to create space for slow-burn research that is more nuanced and complex than the pressures of Research Excellence Framework (REF) cycles currently allow.

THE ANALYTIC: VISIBILITY IS A TRAP?

I regard The Analytic as potentially the most dangerous stage in the *currere* process because, in “analysing and comprehending our ‘now’” (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108), there is a risk of getting stuck, of living forever in a reflective echo chamber of one's own making and being unable to make progress. Given the particular neoliberal constructions of accountability that characterise the HE system, which function to maintain power and control by surveilling both academics and their students, one can sometimes feel trapped (Foucault, 1977). Drawing on Paul and Beierling (2017), Forde (2023) notes that the autobiographical demands of engaging in the *currere* process require “courage” on the part of an individual (p. 5). Recalling and reflecting upon experiences can be a complicated and emotive undertaking, triggering residual feelings about “episodes from our past” (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108). Further, sharing these reflections publicly can feel high-risk and exposing.

Time is important here, in allowing space to sift, process, reflect, and revisit but only when one is ready to do so. I have found it empowering to draw on past experiences as a way to rationalise the present. The post-pandemic, post-Brexit era is bringing with it a new set of challenges that appear to be pushing many UK HEIs to an unsustainable breaking point. Having an appreciation for and an understanding of what came before generates strength and wisdom, in the sense that I am aware of possible trajectories in senior management decision-making and can maintain measured responses to situations and people as sector-wide precarity evolves and

deepens. I am clear about what I do *not* want to be or become on the basis of what I have witnessed in the past and, therefore, feel stoically capable of holding-steady in stormy seas.

“Comprehending our now” (Pinar, 1975, as quoted in Smith, 2022, p. 108) connects with understanding the insidiousness of neoliberalism. HE is a business, playing target-driven numbers games in the name of competitive edge. Where HE Open Days used to be about course content and assessment methods, they now function as a shopfront of helium balloons and free pizza. “Success” (which is a relative concept, see Heslin, 2005) is measured by the reach and circulation of snappy social media content and league-table positions, whilst costly mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and REF arguably demand time and resources that would be better spent on actual teaching and research. An understanding of the past (be it one’s personal story or bigger socio-historical narratives) provides explanations for why the HE sector is in its current state and certainly accounts for my own hesitant relationship with the “now.”

THE SYNTHETIC: RECOGNISING PATTERNS AND MAKING CHOICES

The final stage in the *currere* process requires a connecting of the dots to build new understandings. For Forde (2023), this stage provides “a means of exercising (his) agency” (p. 6), which may be akin to achieving a form of self-actualisation. Exercising *my* agency, such as actively choosing voluntary redundancy, enables me to take charge of my own destiny (or at least conjure the illusion that this is the case). However, for me, the priority is self-preservation, especially in terms of safeguarding my health, and I acknowledge that this sometimes manifests as a tendency to self-sabotage. I continue to wrestle with fear, apathy, and disillusionment, as the long shadows of past experiences cast doubt on the future.

New “knowings” about the present should ideally be easily locatable in terms of ethically sound and transparent decision-making practices that are justified and clearly explained. Choices, actions, and consequences should not be at the mercy of volatile external factors, especially hostile politics. The boom-and-bust narrative arc recounted here serves as a powerful illustration of how situations can play-out within a broader context that is completely out of one’s control (such as student recruitment, HE funding formulae, and staffing costs). The HE system deserves greater stability, so that its activities can be less reactive. Whilst the relationship between choices, actions, and consequences is difficult to navigate, I have found that the habit of reflective practice has a cumulative effect that is generally positive in terms of building insights and understanding.

For me, constructing new “knowings” is about drawing together the accumulated knowledge of the past and using it to build trusted relationships with others in the present, to facilitate and support open dialogue. The most significant revelation during the experience of redundancy was the power of honest conversation with colleagues, which rendered an unsettling situation tolerable. Sharing common experiences can be reassuring, and a collective articulation of worries can help one to feel less alone, so it is important to resist potentially divisive rhetoric and gas-lighting in favour of cooperation, integrity, and collegiality (Forde, 2023). This drive for common good may well have been what Newman (1859/1996) had in mind as a positive consequence of a liberal education.

CLOSING REMARKS

Forde (2023) sees the practice of *currere* as “an ongoing engagement with our lived experience such that it remains limber, such that our past does not simply accumulate and become compacted” (p. 9) The importance of remaining “limber” and not allowing oneself to be paralysed by that which cannot be controlled is a realisation that I have come to in recent years. It is the small, consistent, authentic acts of “doing agency” that have enabled me to maintain a professional identity that feels true-to-self. My view of the HE system and my place within it is driven by a personal desire to support students, myth-bust, ask the difficult questions, and call-out the many little injustices that perpetuate inequalities. I have learnt the rules in order to quietly rebel against them and, thus, “do agency” in a way that aligns with my values.

Returning to my student’s question about whether changes to the system have “changed students,” there is ample evidence to support this likelihood. The marketization of HE has created the consumer-student (see Dearing, 1997) who expects to receive the end-product of a degree-level qualification because they have paid for it (Bunce et al., 2017). The enormous financial commitment of attending university often means that students (especially those from working-class backgrounds such as my own) must work full-time in order to support themselves which, ironically, makes it difficult for them to attend classes. Such circumstances may explain the functional way in which many approach their studies, where focus is placed on doing well in assessments rather than experiencing education for education’s sake. Students’ agency, as learners, is straightjacketed by financial pressure.

By association, neoliberalisation of the system has also changed academics. The negative impacts of increased workloads have eroded the good will that, historically, enabled the system to flex and adapt. The demands and distractions of external agendas often make it difficult to commit to the now, and the short-term, cyclic nature of change breeds scepticism. My tendency towards romanticism and my Welsh mind-set mean that I may also be guilty of “hiraeth,” longing for an HE system that probably never really existed. I once believed that it was possible to change whole systems from within. Past experience, however, has taught me that this is not possible, because the system is so much bigger than the individual and/or a single institution. HE is only one small thread in a socio-political tapestry that is beginning to unravel. Systemic change, therefore, and the possibility of “doing agency” becomes about small acts of rebellion and little wins, rather than all-out revolution.

In this article, I have attempted to trace the evolution of my time in the UK (Welsh) HE system by utilising the principles of *currere* as a sense-making structure. The corporatisation of universities has demanded that those working within the system must manage and accommodate accelerating cycles of change, which can be difficult to reconcile. *Currere* provides opportunities to pause and think, which can be useful when processing the now. Past experiences certainly offer opportunities to recognise and predict patterns, which help one to maintain a sense of autonomy, agency, and inner peace in a bilious sea of corporate slogans. Taking time to understand the frameworks that govern the system facilitates its steady navigation, and authentically sharing experiences with colleagues can draw out collective concerns that mitigate individual worries.

The habitual thinking and reflection that has occupied my mind throughout my career has not only functioned as a means to find ways of continuing to work within the system (where there has often been an urge to run for the hills) but has also been a necessary means to self-soothe, rationalise, (attempt to) accept, and circumvent (where possible) its most paralysing elements. Knowing the reasons why, being able to account for things in the context of an evolving timeline,

recognising patterns, correcting (re)written narratives, and calling-out contradiction become ways to navigate change that also protect one's sanity. Armed with a quiet stillness borne of deep thinking and anchored somewhere in a whirlpool of reeling disillusionment, it is possible to find an individual path that still feels authentic and honest. If I did not believe this to be true, I would not still be present in the system. For now, in mournful lament, I drink tea and reflect.

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