

Liquid Surveillance in the Marketized University

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The neoliberal project to marketize higher education (HE) has resulted in the implementation and normalisation of surveillance technologies within the university (Williamson, 2018). Alongside this, there is a crisis of mental illness amongst students. In neoliberal society, there is a tendency to solve public issues with private solutions (Fisher, 2011). The private company, Solutionpath, posits their learning analytic platform as a resolution to the problem of student mental illness (Gascoigne, 2019).

However, is it possible that a product which is designed to maximise university income and generate corporate profit will be geared in the best interests of students? By examining the Student Retention, Engagement, Attainment and Monitoring platform (StREAM) through a critical lens, it becomes clear that separating care from the corporate is not a clear-cut endeavour.

Since the initial introduction of university fees for international students imposed by Thatcher in the eighties, there has been a consistent and successful effort to (neo)liberalise education policy (Salem et al, 2018). One impact of this has been the conversion of higher education from a free public service into a marketized one. This effort has not only changed the university but has also altered the role of students. Today, students are constructed firstly as consumers

and consequently may consider education to be primarily an economic investment. This mentality increases pressure on students who see their degree as a means to gain personal wealth (Salem et al, 2018). Failure to succeed academically is high stakes when attending university results in large amounts of debt. Currently, university fees are at an all-time high.

Alongside this, the slashing of maintenance loans and snowballing rent prices have coincided with a disturbing increase in student suicides (Crawford, 2020). It is clear that students are feeling the pressure; many

students are now living with the reality of precarious work, low wages, high rent payments, vast debt and mental illness (Crawford, 2020). Were the students of today expecting to be living this precarious lifestyle; forced to gaze into the bleak abyss of their limited employment prospects whilst the

weight of debt hangs vexingly above their heads? Unfortunately, awakening to this concoction of unanticipated troubles is for Fisher, perhaps, part of the disturbing reality of living in a post-Fordist society (2009).

However, whilst post-Fordism may be a useful theory for summarising certain changes over the past forty years, the focus on the industrial and the centrality of work in post-Fordist



theory fails to encapsulate a holistic representation of present-day life. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) characterises contemporary society as “Liquid Modernity” and in doing so incorporates a range of circumstances into his description. From this view, the bright future which today’s students are promised is intangible; all they can do is observe as the prospects of the stable job for life, the affordable mortgage and the decent pension dissipate before their eyes. The anxiety is palpable. As they are plunged into the uncertainty of liquid modernity, there is no choice but to “abandon all hope of totality” (Bauman, 2000, p.22) and endeavour to manage the challenges of living in a state of permanent instability. Bauman’s theory poses an explanation for why so many students may be suffering from mental illness. His concept is also useful in analysing the solutions that the university and the corporate have offered in an attempt to solve this problem.

The collection and presentation of metrics have played a central role in the imposition of neoliberalism (Beer, 2016), and today, UK HE has one of the most advanced data infrastructures in the world (Williamson, 2018). This means that staff and students are consistently monitored. This data is then utilised to propel marketisation as the information offers validation for further reform; in this sense, data collection and marketisation go hand in hand (Williamson, 2016).

The learning analytic platform, StREAM is a private service which has been utilised by many universities across the UK. The purpose of the software as stated by Solutionpath, the company behind StREAM, is to serve the dual purpose of supporting student’s wellbeing and to improve student retention (Solutionpath,

2020). StREAM collects data on student behaviour; this ranges from monitoring a student’s VLE usage to gathering their locational data. This information is then relayed to students, who are able to view their “engagement score” on an interactive dashboard. The score allegedly reflects the students’ odds of dropping out. In the event the score becomes critically low, an alert is sent out to both the student and their tutor.

Solutionpath has released several blog posts proposing data collection and analysis as a solution to the student mental health crisis (Gascoigne, 2019). However, Fisher (2011) highlights the complexity of the crux between profit and care; in neoliberal society, there is a tendency towards the privatisation of stress

within which corporate means are proposed as solutions to public problems. By feeding them an engagement score, StREAM places the responsibility of academic success onto students. They are responsible for self-managing, and any academic issues

that they face are their own, because they could have acted upon the information presented to them and made changes should any problems had arisen. This individualised response to stress is what Smail named “magical voluntarism” (Fisher, 2011, p.12), a concept which Fisher held as central to the accomplishment of neoliberalism. Under magical voluntarism “you can change the world you are in” and “if we don’t succeed, it is simply because we have not put the work in to reconstruct ourselves” (Fisher, 2011, p.12).

Solutionpath offers no evidence to their claim that learning analytics could pose a solution to the student mental health crisis, they only



postulate the possibility. This idea feels hollow considering the urgency of the student mental health crisis and the profit motive which inevitably drives Solutionpath as a company. Research into the use of data analytic platforms in education has suggested that creating student data-doubles generates a one-dimensional representation of real human subjects and fails to explain the intricacies and meanings behind student behaviour (Kumar et al, 2019). Adjacent to this, there is evidence which suggests that whilst students who engage in self-surveillance may experience satisfaction, they also may experience anxiety (Kumar et al, 2019). Fisher supported this notion, as he suggested self-audit creates further anxiety, as it intensifies the amount of responsibility, and thus stress, placed on the audited (2011).



For Bauman and Lyon (2013), the proliferation of surveillance in a liquid modern world posits some key contemporary ethical concerns, mainly the problem of adiaphorization. Adiaphorization is the tendency for “systems and processes [to] become split off from any consideration of morality” (Bauman, Lyon, 2013, p.7).

The underlying purpose of StREAM, as with any dataveillance technology, is to monitor the behaviour of individuals in an attempt to direct their behaviour in a certain direction (Esposti, 2014). As illustrated, there lies within the process of the data feedback loop the potential to cause undue stress to students. StREAM does not address the reasons why a student might be struggling to engage with their course, it merely presents a numerical value which may or may not reflect the

student’s chances of completing their degree. At best, the software will notify their tutor of their low-engagement and encourage them to intervene.

This in itself is problematic as university tutors are not equipped, nor paid to deal with the mental illness of students. This hands-off approach does not address the real-life-problems a student might be facing, but it does enable the university to demonstrate its interactions with the student, so if the student becomes mentally ill or ends their own life, the university is able to transcend responsibility as long as the correct processes were followed. After Will Bargate, a twenty three year old student, was found dead after taking his own life, it was revealed that the University of Warwickshire had sent out several emails warning Will that his low engagement could result in suspension.

Warwickshire University did not try to reach Will via any means other than email. When questioned about their role in the well-being of Will, the university responded saying that it had acted “in line with our processes” (Warwickshire University spokesperson, in Price, 2020) therefore dispelling the university of any responsibility to have acted otherwise. This is not to say that the University of Warwickshire is responsible for Will’s death.

However, this case exemplifies the distance technology creates between the watcher and the watched and the moral grey zone which this distance produces: “surveillance streamlines the process of doing things at a distance, of separating a person from the consequences of an action” (Lyon, 2013, p. 7).

The entanglement of the marketisation of HE and the student mental health crisis has resulted in the employment of corporate solutions to a public problem. One form this

has taken, is the learning analytic platform StREAM. The separation of systems and processes from ethics enables universities to dispel responsibility for student wellbeing. This is concerning when more students than ever are suffering from mental illness.

Whilst universities have student support services, these feel inadequate to tackle such a huge problem in their current form. However, in liquid modernity, it is difficult to suggest what changes could pose potential solutions to this problem, as the spectre of instability lies ahead. However, whatever changes do happen need to be substantial, and a good place to start could be to de-marketize HE and reinstate grants. This would, at least, alleviate the financial pressure that many students now face.

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