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Feeling Redundancy

By Paul Simpson

Abstract

Redundant. Adjective meaning: no longer needed or useful; superfluous; no longer in employment due to no more work available; able to be omitted without loss of meaning or function; not strictly necessary to functioning of system / other components.

Redundancy, and being at risk of being made redundant, is an increasingly felt circumstance in contemporary higher education. As the impacts of a range of neoliberal educational reforms unfold against a backdrop of demographic change and significant economic uncertainty (both pandemic-driven and otherwise), Universities have recently resorted to both voluntary and compulsory redundancy to manage a university model based on a competitive and fluctuating student market. This commentary reflects on the collective feelings that circulated around being put 'at risk' of redundancy and subsequent encounters with others' unfolding (potential and actual) redundancy. In doing so, attention is turned to the spaces-times in which redundancy and the 'consultations' over it played out – meeting and teaching rooms, offices, corridors, graduation ceremonies, kitchens, cafes, amongst others – and the varied collective feelings that circulated / coexisted in and through them. At a time when such processes are unfolding across the sector, this commentary seeks to open up a space for reflection on what many would rather not consider: the disturbing circumstances of feeling redundancy.

Feeling Redundancy

Circumstances

Redundant. Adjective meaning: no longer needed or useful; superfluous; no longer in employment due to no more work available; able to be omitted without loss of meaning or function; not strictly necessary to functioning of system / other components.

Redundancy, and being at risk of being made redundant, is an increasingly felt circumstance in contemporary UK higher education amongst support, professional services, and academic staff. As the impacts of a range of neoliberal educational reforms unfold against a backdrop of demographic change and significant economic uncertainty (both pandemic-driven and otherwise), Universities have recently had to resort to both voluntary and compulsory redundancy to manage a university funding model based on a competitive and fluctuating student market. This is not an isolated situation. While compiling accurate data is challenging given the different degrees of publicity (and confidentiality) that go with various processes, it has been suggested that from late 2018 to mid-2019 redundancy processes have impacted on workers from more than 30 UK Universities (see Medium.com 2018), with numerous others having since emerged (for example, see University of Leicester UCU 2021).

Redundancy is not easy to talk about and is often something we'd rather not have to think about. Redundancy is the sort of thing that keeps us awake at night; it is the stuff of nightmares. Redundancy, or being at risk of being made redundant, manifests in lived realities as a deeply felt circumstance that comes to pervade professional and personal life, unbalancing work *and* life. The risk of redundancy might be seen to constitute a sort of atmosphere in the form of 'background noise' amid everyday life which, at times, erupts into more pressing concern. Even when only encountered through the filter of social media and others' accounts of unfolding circumstances, it creeps in and can settle in the back of our minds. In this way these sorts of circumstances "cannot be fully registered by *one* kind of atmosphere ... in such a way that it becomes a coherent setting for action" (Raynor 2017: 198). Rather, redundancy is messy in all sorts of ways.

In this short commentary I want to talk about redundancy. I'm not seeking to tell *the* story of how redundancy and its risk unfold and are felt. Far from it. Taking inspiration from recent work that thinks through how circumstances around, for example, precarity and austerity are lived and felt in sensing bodies (see Hitchen 2016; 2021; Raynor 2017), and other auto-biographical accounts of working in the neoliberal academy (England 2016), this is just a story. The account presented here emerges from my own story of facing redundancy and is developed in light of the still ongoing afterlives of that encounter. In this sense, this commentary seeks to open up a space for reflection on what many would simply rather not consider: the disturbing circumstances of feeling redundancy.

In thinking about feeling redundancy in the University sector, I'm following in the footsteps of a range of work which has sought to consider the damaging circumstances which increasingly pervade the neoliberalization of the academy (Mullings, Peake and Parizeau 2016). A range of geographers have begun to reflect on the deleterious effects and affects brought about by increased competition, the revaluing of academic labour in terms of market value, and the associated differentiation of staff through neoliberal audit systems that generate an "atmosphere of close and constant evaluation" (Berg, Huijbens and Larsen 2016: 177). In such work we encounter nuanced reflections on student and staff mental health and mental illness, on stress and anxiety, and on the lack of wellbeing currently being produced by the irreconcilable demands and actions requires of those working and studying in universities today (Maclean 2016; Mullings, Peake and Parizeau 2016; Mountz 2016; Simard-Gagnon 2016). While reference has been made in such work to redundancy, redundancy itself and the specific processes that it unfolds through have not yet received explicit attention as a felt reality of contemporary university life.¹ What happens, then, when the sense of instability and precarity that are now so embedded in the neoliberal academy reach a tipping point, moving from a variously backgrounded sense of uncertainty over the future to a more pointed reality of actual and immediate threat?

In thinking about the specific space-times of experience in the unfolding of redundancy and its risk, my focus here will fall at the micro-scale; thinking about the banal yet highly charged everyday realities of where redundancy is lived through. Attention will be turned to the banal spaces-times in which redundancy and the 'consultations' over it play out – meeting and teaching rooms, offices, corridors, graduation ceremonies, kitchens, cafes, amongst others – and the varied collective feelings that can circulate / coexist in and through them. This unfolds across reflection on 6 themes: Forms, Terms, Relations, Spaces, Temporalities, and Returns.

Forms

Redundancy is not a singular thing and is not felt the same amongst those at risk of it or made redundant. To use Esther Hitchen's (2016: 103) terms in describing austerity, redundancy is "always and already multiple as it is lived". Redundancy then, again to borrow from Ruth Raynor (2017: 198), is "not felt or related to ... as a shared encounter or a coherent mood". Rather, redundancy is more like a singular-plural (Simpson 2015);

¹ It's important to recognise that other people's redundancy has been a concern for geographers for some time. For example, economic geographers have considered how workers adapt in the face of economic restructuring. Often in the context of manufacturing industries and industrial decline, this work considers how workers respond to the challenges posed by involuntary redundancy, how they 'make do' and 'get by' (MacKinnon 2017; Pinch and Mason 1991; Shuttleworth et al 2005). Further, and particularly in the context of austerity agendas and related cuts in the state welfare, the challenges of automation and the contradictions of contemporary waged work have also been highlighted (Diprose 2015). Equally, there has been attention recently in this to "the ordinary, everyday actions, relations and contexts through which [such responses] occur" (MacKinnon 2017: 74), and with that an attention to the temporalities and spatial relations significant to post-redundancy experiences.

it is multiple in occurrence, unfolding, implication, and is differentiated by the specific circumstances of those involved.

More formally, redundancy takes many forms.

Redundancy can be voluntary. The extent to which that qualification accurately represents the circumstances present around such decision-making, though, is debateable.

Redundancy can be compulsory. There's less room for debate in that.

But compulsory redundancy can be further differentiated...

Compulsory redundancy can be an inevitability. Such redundancy can be a known and dated event that you are made aware of before a job is even started through the imposition of a fixed-term duration.

Such planned redundancy means that redundancy can be a regular and recurring circumstance for a host of precariously employed, temporary, most commonly early career staff, as repeat fixed-term contracts run their course

When not fixed, the risk of redundancy can still be something that recurs cyclically with the boom and bust of institutional (mis-)fortunes amid a competition-based, marketized funding model. Redundancy becomes a sort of 'necessary housekeeping' for organizations like universities which end up being undertaken by managers regularly to ensure functionality in an underfunded system.

But from the side of the employee, redundancy and its risk – whether known in advance, cyclical, or an unwelcome surprise – can be a traumatic disruption to the personal and professional life of individuals, placing myriad plans, commitments, and dependencies at risk.

Terms

Redundancy itself is a word that is often avoided when the risk of redundancy appears.

Redundancy remains unsaid at times because it is not (yet) allowed to be said. At other times, it is simply too hard to say. It is almost said, but after a pause, another word awkwardly takes its place.

Redundancy. I'm going to use the word. In fact, I'm going to use it a lot. Over 100 times. I'm going to actually say redundancy over and over because I'm sick of others not saying it, of people hiding from it in meeting after meeting, in email after email, in press release after press release.

So...

Redundancy unfolds through euphemism. Redundancy's rationale is phrased in terms of 'financial sustainability of service delivery', 'meeting changing needs', 'budget balancing', 'savings', and 'adjustments' or 'reductions' in the number of employees that managers 'would like to discuss with you'. Awkward grammatical gymnastics and role fabrications ensue to stay on script. 'Cases for change' are articulated as part of 'change programmes' by 'change leads'.

Redundancy is differentiated in synonym. 'Voluntary severance' or 'VS' schemes are run rather than 'voluntary redundancies'. But there aren't enough volunteers so voluntary redundancies come next. And then compulsory ones. But that's still not enough. Rumour of a planned 'voluntary departure' scheme emerges but word has it that it was quietly renamed to 'voluntary leaving' when it is realised that convincing staff to take 'VD' might be, well, challenging. While these terminologies exist, those choosing voluntary severance, voluntary leaving, and/or made redundant whether compulsory or voluntarily subsequently come to be referred to simply, *en masse*, as 'leavers'.

Relations

Redundancy becomes tangible the way that it re-shapes personal, familial, and professional relationships. Redundancy is felt individually, collectively, and in relations.

Redundancy is "experienced differently and discordantly over space and time. ... operat[ing] – it seems – as a series of fractured encounters with fracturing effects" (Raynor 2017: 198).

Redundancy it is felt in reassurances made in corridor conversations amongst colleagues technically in competition with each other to avoid redundancy but remaining collegiate in the face of it all.

Redundancy is felt in offers of advice and help in the drafting of redundancy applications from colleagues, either at risk or not.

Redundancy is felt in the awkwardness and apologies of colleagues removed from risk as a result of voluntary decisions made by those in other redundancy pools.

Redundancy is felt through emails of reassurance and support from distant colleagues and is felt again in awkward questions asked at conferences about how things are going now.

Redundancy is felt through the supportive tweets of distant colleagues in response to tweets you post and subsequently, cyclically, delete due to feelings of (what potentially wasn't?) paranoia over the risk of institutional attention to such forms of media.



Paul Simpson  @psim... · 02/11/2018 ✓

Twitter break for a few weeks, but, you know...



Redundancy is felt in what David Bissell (2014) describes as the 'slow creep' of stress, in rapidly shortening tempers and the increasingly clipped responses to those at little or no fault, something only seen in 'backwards-tracing realizations'.

Redundancy is felt in a crippling inability to focus or concentrate.

Redundancy is felt in the powerlessness of not being able to do anything about being at risk or to mitigate that risk even if you could concentrate given there is no time to do anything that might make a difference.

Redundancy is felt late at night as angry emails are composed in your head when sleep won't come, again and again and again.

Redundancy is felt in the cracking of a voice during a consultation meeting as the future realities of the evaluation criteria under discussion force themselves into view.

Redundancy is felt in the lack of atmosphere present in a normally busy department, the offices being avoided in an effort to avoid the feelings 'this place' elicits.

Redundancy is felt in the pit of your stomach as you become increasingly sensitised to the arrival of email after email; emails sent via the account of a faceless name from the HR department now synonymous with redundancy consultation but rarely the author of any of their content.

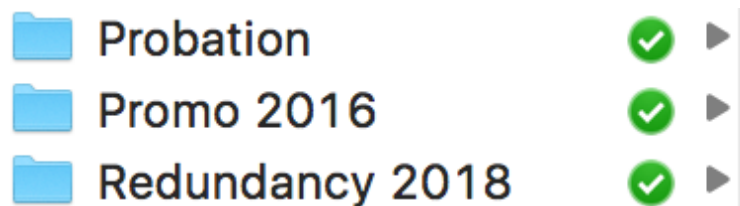
Redundancy is felt in the office wall at which objects are thrown when yet another email arrives, with yet another update about your 'consultation', with yet another (well intentioned) document containing points that your redundancy application 'could' (but feels *should*) address.

Redundancy is felt when you crack, when you pass a threshold, when you can no longer stand what you put up with before, even yesterday (Deleuze and Parnett 2002). But you have to stand it, you have to go on.

Redundancy then continues to be felt in the sometimes muttered, sometimes shouted obscenities sounded when the push to keep going, to 'keep the show on the road', just pushes too far.

Redundancy is felt as, night after night, you rename your redundancy application file to an ever-escalating version number.

Redundancy is felt to lack irony when you subsequently realize the career progression inadvertently outlined in your computer's filing system.



Spaces

Redundancy unfolds in and reshapes the most banal of University spaces-times that stubbornly refuse to recognize the exceptional nature of what is going on.

Redundancy, or rather, the risk of being made redundant first registers throughout a euphemism laden staff meeting held at 9am on the first day of 'Freshers' Week' in the room you spent hours teaching the previous year. But you still have to welcome and induct new students later that day, students who might outlast you at the institution.

Redundancy pushes into your otherwise happy thoughts as you sit on stage at graduation, potentially in view of the cameras filming the ceremony and projecting onto a large screen behind you. You're left with no choice but to listen and try as best you can to not visibly react as the University's grand plans for future investment are outlined to Graduands and their assembled family and friends, plans necessary to be competitive in today's market driven sector but which you might not be around to see come to fruition.

Redundancy consultation processes are explained one day and the next, in the same room, a staff meeting is held to discuss the redesign of the teaching programme. But that redesign must remain a 'flexible sketch' that must be able to accommodate the future reality where multiple staff present discussing that future programme will not necessarily be there to teach it.

Redundancy process are felt through the presence of closed meeting rooms blinds. You had never noticed these blinds before (are they new?) as they certainly were never closed before. Now they're closed regularly.

Redundancy outcomes are confirmed via email for those no longer at immediate risk in language that is evidently chosen to avoid false reassurances over the future security of your job. Again, 'redundancy' is not used, its absence screaming at you from the screen.

Redundancy continues to be consulted upon for those who continue to be 'at risk', face-to-face, behind the closed binds, but now in staff offices rather than meeting rooms.

Redundancy is manifest in empty offices.

Redundant name badges remain outside empty office doors for months to come.

Redundant books are left in a corridor.

Temporalities

But redundancy does not have a simple linear temporality of announced risk, consultation, evaluation, and decision.

Redundancy can "ebb and flow in intensity as it is made present in everyday life" (Hitchen 2021: 297).

Redundancy might loom in the rhythmic return of contract renewal (or not) after contract renewal (or not).

Redundancy is consulted on in a way that holds it at a distance, a future presence which may or may not come to be. Through this, redundancy, and compulsory redundancy in particular, is denied existence on the basis that it is, as yet, only being consulted upon.

Redundancy consultations unfold alongside the eternal return of teaching terms and all that come with them: inductions, lectures, tutorials, seminars, meetings, marking deadlines, and email after email.

Redundancy consultation meetings overrun into teaching slots leaving you arriving at small group tutorial sessions both physically late and mentally absent.

Redundancy consultations can unfold on what are felt simultaneously as both intense and drawn-out timeframes. 6-8 weeks is made to feel both like months and minutes.

Redundancy consultations – despite seemingly cookie-cutter press releases circulating on social media proclaiming that senior managers are 'consulting closely with staff and trade unions to minimize job losses' – heavily circumscribe what it is that is under consultation, giving a false sense of their purpose. It is less the 'what' (i.e. redundancy) that is the subject of consultation and more the 'how' (i.e. who, how many, when, by what criteria) of redundancy that are for discussion.

Redundancy can again become a potential future prospect in a feedback meeting that takes place a couple of months after a decision was made on your last redundancy application.

Redundancy can loom on the horizon for months, coming to define a whole academic year, and then disappear as 'leaving' is a sufficiently appealing prospect for a significant number of staff, as forecast recruitment turns out to be of an acceptable level, as staff move for other jobs and are not replaced, and as other opportunities are found to chip away at imbalanced budgets.

Redundancy renders futures uncertain both in terms of the outcome of consultation but also in the sense of how it might be possible to 'return to normal'.

Redundancy starts to slip from consciousness over time but does not go away, re-emerging as recruitment cycles unfold and projected student numbers are debated year-on-year.

Redundancy doesn't go away as teaching evaluations are collected and option module choices are made.

Redundancy doesn't go away as papers are submitted and grant applications are submitted (and more than likely rejected).

Redundancy doesn't go away because for some daft reason you thought it might be therapeutic to write a presentation on redundancy for a conference session on contemporary affects (Spoilers: It wasn't).

Redundancy lingers in the feeling that managers simply don't understand what redundancy's varied unfolding did for those who remain, a feeling that you find later is shared amongst others who went through it alongside you.

Redundancy lingers in feeling bad about feeling bad given others came off so much worse.

Returns (Addendum)

Redundancy returns. Not (yet) in further consultation over your job. But it stays with you even though years have passed and you've tried to move on while staying put.

Redundancy processes continue to trouble the sector. Messages arrive from friends working at other Universities who find themselves facing redundancy and its consultations, asking for advice because they know you've been through it (and gave a conference paper on it).

Redundancy returns but this time as past experiences and strategies are recounted, finding another life in a still uncertain present. You realise that you really still haven't moved on and damages done years ago fester.

Redundancy seems to increasingly circulate on social media as exceptional events occur and failures in Government compound matters.

Redundancy processes are tweeted about around the country. You want to say something but you can't. But you're drawn in, tagged in tweets and outraged at what is being done to others, worse than what was done to you. Tweets make generous reference to, you guessed it, the paper you gave at a conference, the paper you wish you hadn't given because writing it didn't help. Questions over what you did with that emerge and scripts are sent because it feels like you sharing those feelings might be doing something to help. Encouragement to 'do something with it' return but you are reticent. Should you return to that again? Can you return to it? What feelings will it open up and what (little) will it achieve? I guess we'll see...

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