"It is people who make education work": a content analysis of trade union teach-outs in leading UK universities

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Abstract

This research note examines what academic trade unionists teach when they are no longer constrained by institution and curriculum. To do so, I undertake a content analysis of the February-March 2020 teach-out programmes of University and College Union (UCU) branches based in 23 of the leading (Russell Group) universities. Striking over pensions and pay, equality, casualisation and workload, these branches were part of the 74 undertaking the largest wave of industrial action in UK higher education history.

I begin the note by defining a 'teach-out' in the context of the range of activities occurring as part of the strike wave, before highlighting some of the public motivations behind organising teach-out programmes. I outline the influence of Covid-19 upon my research design, outlining how my methodology helped to resolve the procrastination that had set in under lockdown conditions.

I then present my findings, demonstrating that the topics covered by the 491 teach-outs analysed can be understood as belonging to 8 'code families' - equalities; environmentalism; work, protest and social change; critiquing/reimaging the university; arts and literature; history; wider politics; and a range of 'other' topics. These categories be usefully understood as a typology of teach-out content.

The note concludes by questioning the relationship between equalities teach-outs and the goals of UCU, suggesting that the apparent overlap may - alongside further research - illuminate the relationship between member concerns and union policy.

Keywords: Education, higher education, industrial action, strike, teach-out, trade union, UCU, unionism, university

It was my experience of the labour studies MA at Ruskin College that fed my curiosity about a very different type of activist education – the UCU teach-outs that characterised the industrial action within the UK university sector. Simply put, having graduated with from a masters programme that was run by and for trade unionists, I wondered: *what do academic trade unionists in other disciplines plan to teach when they are not restrained by curriculum and their institutions?*

To answer this, I undertook a content analysis of the February-March 2020 teach-out programmes of UCU branches based in 23 Russell Group universities. Concerned with pensions and pay, equality, casualisation and workload, these branches were part of the 74 undertaking the largest wave of strikes in UK higher education history[1].

I begin this note by defining a 'teach-out' and suggesting some of the motivations behind organising teach-out programmes. I then outline the influence of Covid-19 upon my research design before describing how the content analysis was undertaken. I critique the quality of the data before presenting my findings, demonstrating that the topics covered by the 491 teach-outs analysed can be understood as belonging to 8 code families - equalities; environmentalism; work, protest and social change; critiquing/reimaging the university; arts and literature; history; wider politics; and a range of 'other' topics. I conclude by questioning the relationship between equalities teach-outs and the goals of UCU.

What and why

I understand a teach-out as:

> *A bespoke event organised during industrial action in education whose principal purpose is the education of staff, students (and occasionally the wider community). This education focus is distinct from entertainment/morale boosting activities; overt organising activities towards maintaining the strike/related issues; and the educational elements of activities that would be popularly understood as a component of a different 'type' of event (e.g. rally, strike meeting). This event typically takes place at a site not used for higher education teaching.*

This definition was developed inductively in parallel to undertaking the content analysis. Impressed by the wide range of creative activities that accompanied the withdraw of academic labour, I cast a broad net whilst collecting my sample before narrowing the definition as a result of this overview. This process was necessary because many of these 'other activities' were listed on strike and/or teach-out programmes.

Doubtless the motivations behind organising these teach-out programmes during the strike wave varied across institutions. Nonetheless, blurbs accompanying the programmes occasionally outlined some overarching public goals:

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[1] https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10643/UKs-biggest-ever-university-strikes-as-staff-begin-14-days-of-walkouts-on-Thursday

> We all acknowledge the disruption the strikes will cause to teaching, learning and research, and deeply regret that the employers have created the untenable situation we find ourselves in. However, we also maintain that learning is not the sole preserve of university classrooms and lecture theatres – it can take place in any space, at any time. Students and staff can create alternative spaces of community and learning in and around the strike action - University of Edinburgh UCU[2]

Here there is a distinction between the university-as-an-institution and the university-as-community. The programmes demonstrated that it was possible in the short term to maintain the latter without the disruptive former, prefiguring of a different university. As Nottingham UCU noted: "Come along to learn more about the modern university, and how we can improve it, as well as a range of other pressing topics."[3]

Other teach-outs stressed the role of staff in providing this education, that there is in the final analysis no university without workers. This message is quoted in the title of this essay: "The teach out programme also reminds the University that it is people who make education work, not the buildings or the technology inside".[4] Or: locked out of the resources provided by the university-as-institution, some form of education endures regardless.

Covid-19

The degree to which research is inevitably shaped by the environment in which it is produced notwithstanding, this essay is indelibly shaped by Covid-19. Unlike many PhD students, I was relatively unaffected by lockdown. But inevitably, the "three app anxiety scroll" (Norton 2020) took over, and I found myself constantly flicking between Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, unable to focus. I'm given to chronic anxiety, but as the horrifying death-count in the UK rose alongside the economic and social cost, I wasn't unique in having difficult moments (ONS 2020).

I admitted defeat in early June. My attention-span shot, I found it increasingly difficult to focus on the thematic coding required for my thesis. Procrastination is not normally something I suffer with but increasingly become an affliction. After talking with my supervisor, I took a month off to focus on 'something else.'

This essay is that 'something else'. One cure for procrastination is the setting of defined, realistic tasks (Cottrell 2019; Murray 2014) – and the collation and reformatting of teach-out programmes lent itself to this. I was able to process a set number each evening, and in completing this, able to see the outcome of work as lines on the spreadsheet. I could put the stereo on and make a pot of

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[2] https://edinburghteachouts.wordpress.com/

[3] http://uonucu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/strike2.pdf

[4] www.ucu.cam.ac.uk/teach-outs/

coffee, mute my phone and work for an hour and feel that something had been achieved. I hope that sharing this context is helpful for others working under similar conditions.

Methodology

My methodology drew upon Bryman's chapter on content analysis (2012, 288-308). I balanced the need for a precise and defined coding schedule (ibid) with the inductive sensibility that my PhD supervisors have laboured to instil in me, holding in tension for as long as possible this precision with an openness to 'seeing what is there' within the sample.

In developing codes describing the content of teach-outs, I drew upon my experience of qualitative thematic analysis (Saldana 2016; Gibson & Brown 2009). Although seemingly methodologically incoherent, it meant allowing the codes to emerge iteratively from the sample, mirroring my experience of thematically coding interview transcripts. The content of the programmes did not fit a standardised format and this approach enabled the development of codes that more closely matched the painfully shifting parameters of the data being analysed.

The Sample

I worked with resources on the UCU website[5] alongside an initial examination of strike programmes to define the parameters of my sample. In terms of the range of dates for collecting material from Twitter, I focused on the strike dates for each institution, the work days interspersed between them, and Tweets published up to 2 days before the strike began at that university.

Constrained by time, I decided I would capture the data on teach-outs recorded on branch websites. If this was unavailable, *only then I would then examine the branch Twitter account*. I later discovered that Twitter often linked back to branch websites or to blogs set up to promote teach-outs; where these occurred I similarly prioritised these resources over collecting Tweets.

Given the ambiguities of data collection from Twitter (Hedges 2018), I excluded from the sample retweets from personal accounts.

Exploration

I recorded data on my coding schedule, working A-Z through the institutions involved in the strike wave. This meant recording the details of any events that could not immediately be dismissed as *not* being a teach-out because they were

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[5] https://www.ucu.org.uk/heaction-institutions - https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10399/UCU-members-back-strikes-over-...1 - https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10694/HE-pay-reballot-results-January-2020/pdf/ucu_pay-reballot_result-breakdown_jan203.pdf

popularly understood as another 'type' of action. I kept a research journal and recorded early code names for each talk, as well problems as they arose. Despite a union-wide cancellation at a national level of gatherings and pickets due to Covid-19 late in the strike wave,[6] I rejected as too time-consuming proactively identifying which scheduled talks were cancelled.

Coding

Having examined an initial 12 universities, it became apparent that examining all striking institutions was impractical given time constraints. The focus of the study was narrowed to Russell Group universities, reducing the number of institutions from 72 to 23 of the 24 Group members[7] (LSE having failed to meet the ballot threshold). I grouped and merged the initial codes to develop a provisional coding manual to categorise teach-out content. I then collected data for the remaining Russell Group universities and coded the sample, continuing to record observations in my research journal - particularly when the provisional codes proved inadequate. The codes were revised further at the end of this process, and the sample recoded. Having defined a 'teach-out' more concretely, I also excluded from the sample events that appeared to fall outside of this.

I used two key questions to make sense of the sample. Firstly, 'is the topic of the teach-out *solely* focused on the UK or is there a more international focus?' Where this was unclear, the UK was used as default, given the teach-out took place during a UK strike wave. Secondly, 'does the teach-out *solely* relate to academia or to wider society?' Where this was unclear, I categorised the teach-out as related to wider society as the more encompassing category.

These questions created 4 broad categories in which I situated 20 codes, grouped into 8 code families (although two 'families' contained a single code, I use this term for expediency). Where it was impossible to distinguish an appropriate code, I selected the code that appeared first in the content description.

Rigour

Content analysis is only as good as the source material (Bryman 2012) – and this was inconsistent. For example, Cambridge UCU provided an extensive blurb for many of their talks[8] whilst teach-outs at Kings College were often described only by their title[9]. Some records, such as the branch website for the

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[6] https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10692/Reballots-postponed-due-to-Covid-19-pickets-cancelled-but-action-continues?list=10241

[7] https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/

[8] http://www.ucu.cam.ac.uk/teach-outs/

[9] https://twitter.com/KCL_UCU/status/1232051087760338944

University of Southampton UCU[10], were obviously incomplete, and there is the sense that in some institutions, the branch UCU account is not the sole Twitter account.

The nature of the source material also foregrounded the inevitable subjective decision-making involved in coding. The interpretation I was required to undertake remained pronounced throughout. Despite a coding scheme designed to mitigate this, it was obviously problematic to categorise the content of a teach-out armed purely with a title. Such were the limitations of the data in this instance, however.

Results

The table of headline results is ordered by the number of occurrences within the sample. In the explanatory text below, I present these categories in the order of how they best relate to each other. These code families can also be usefully read as categories within a typology.

Code families by frequency	#	%
Equalities	114	23.22
Work and protest	68	13.85
Art and literature	60	12.22
Critiquing/reimaging higher education	57	11.61
Other	56	11.41
Wider politics	48	9.78
History	46	9.37
Environmentalism	42	8.55
Total	491	100.01

Art and literature

This code includes teach-outs on creative writing, literature, classics and the study/practice of/discussion of poetry, music, film, theatre and the visual arts. It includes zine and sticker making, crafting, and critiques of marketing. This code overrules all others where the poet/author or the title of poem/fictional work is mentioned in the teach-out title or blub. It is coded to 60 teach-outs (12.22%).

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[10] https://southampton.web.ucu.org.uk/strike-information/

Equalities

Teach-outs coded to *Equalities* in UK academia cover topics and social movements (including UCU) focusing on UK higher education where they relate to: anti-racism, PREVENT, immigration, the hostile environment, feminism, LGBT+, disability - including mental health - and other equalities related themes. 57 teach-outs (11.61%) are coded as this in the sample. Similar themes relating to international academia are limited to anti-racism and coded to just 2 teach-outs (0.41%).

Teach-outs coded to *Equalities* in UK society cover topics and social movements (including trade unions) focused beyond higher education when they relate to: anti-racism, immigration, the hostile environment, feminism, LGBT+, disability - including mental health - and other equalities related themes. There are 38 teach-outs (7.74%) coded to this. Similar themes within international society - including first nations rights (but with disability notably absent from the sample) - are coded to 17 teach-outs (3.46%).

Environmentalism

Teach-outs coded to *Environmentalism* in UK academia cover topics and social movements (including UCU) focusing on UK higher education where they relate to ecology and environmentalism. There are 10 teach-outs (2.04%) coded to this, whilst similar topics within international academia are entirely absent from the sample.

Teach-outs coded to *Environmentalism* in UK society cover topics and social movements focused beyond higher education where they relate to similar themes of ecology and environmentalism. These are coded to 27 teach-outs (5.50%). Environmentalism and related social movements internationally are coded to 5 teach-outs (1.02%).

Work and protest

Teach-outs coded to *Work and protest* within UK academia cover industrial relations within UK higher education, including teach-outs relating to UCU issues such as pay, pensions and precarity where they are not principally organising opportunities. It covers changes in the nature of university work, critiques of higher education management/rialism, and work-focused social movements within the UK university and related topics. In all cases, it applies only where the teach-out topic falls outside of *Environmental* and/or *Equalities* codes. There are 18 teach-outs (3.67%) coded to this. The international equivalent - covering boycotts and international solidarity from within UK work based social movements alongside case studies and examples of activism within HE internationally - is coded to 11 teach-outs (2.24%).

Teach-outs coded to *Work and protest* in UK society cover similar issues and social movements to the UK academia code, except that here these are focused

beyond higher education. This code also encompasses generic teach-outs concerning generic social movements, protesting and organising skills. This code appears within the sample 31 times (6.31%). The international equivalent, covering precarity, global supply chains, case studies and examples of activism internationally, are coded to 8 teach-outs (1.63%). It does not cover the generic territory of its UK equivalent.

Critiquing/reimagining higher education[11]

Teach-outs coded to this within UK academia relate to radical education and progressive pedagogy. This includes talks that 'reimagine' the university and outline what a preferred model of high education could look like. It also encompasses related UK social movements/critiques within HE that do not fall naturally into other codes – e.g. calls for universities to engage with demilitarisation, de-securitisation and abolitionism, and the generic "student movement". There are 51 teach-outs (10.39%) coded to this. The international equivalent relates to 6 teach-outs (1.22%) relating to student movements, 'reimagining' higher education and inclusive education.

History

History in its UK form, refers to radical history, purely historical case studies, and local history. It includes archiving, historiography, and archaeology with a UK focus, and museum fieldtrips. It appears 29 times (5.91%). The international equivalent encompasses radical history, purely historical case studies and historiography and relates to 17 teach-outs (3.46%).

Wider politics

Teach-outs coded to this relate to austerity, Brexit, housing, poverty, health, police and abolitionism, and other related political issues and social movements outside of higher education where they do not properly relate to other codes. This code refers to 28 teach-outs (5.70%). The international version of the *Wider politics* code relates principally to teach-outs concerning contemporary international case studies and issues, and expressing solidarity with contemporary international social movements outside of higher education where they do not properly relate to other codes. This encompasses 20 of teach-outs (4.07%).

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[11] As benefits the subject matter, the code family for critiquing/reimagining higher education, focuses solely on topics related to UK and international academia, with no teach-outs coded to wider society. Conversely, the code families for history and wider politics are focused on topics outside of higher education, with no teach-outs coded to academic codes.

Other

Unsurprisingly, not every teach-out topic appears frequently enough to warrant its own code. These errant subjects include topics such as physics, critical theory, linguistics, yoga and more. This code encompasses the rare occasion when I was unable to hypotheses the teach-out topic, as well as teach-out slots allocated to the chairs of multi-lecturer events. This code appears 56 times (11.41%).

Conclusion

Having presented the methodology and findings of my content analysis, I want to briefly conclude by highlighting a correlation between equalities teach-out topics and UCU policy. Whilst content analysis cannot answer *why* particular topics are popular (Bryman, 2012), the prevalence of equalities-based teach-out content paralleled one of aspect of the "4 Fights" dispute. The pay claim called for action to be taken to close the pay gaps within the sector, demanding a "...national, time specific, agreement detailing how action will be achieved by each HEI to close the gender and ethnic pay gap."[12]

There are of course other parallels within the equalities code family - such as between teach-outs on Prevent and UCU criticism of this policy.[13] This prompts me to ask: How far are the themes of teach-out sessions consciously influenced by UCU's goals? What is the relationship between equalities teach-outs directly related to issues within UK academia (both those of academics and those of their students) and similar themes explored in a wider UK or international context? What does the content of teach-outs tell us about how far UCU members can be said to be shaping or responding to the concerns of their union?

Put another way: did the teach-out "Challenge and Disrupt: Women's Protest Movement in India Today" at University of Edinburgh[14] occur because the issues highlighted by UCU around gender inequality prompted their exploration in a different context? Or did examining an international context lead to an awareness of the UK concerns that fed in to UCU policy? If UCU concerns, UK teach-out topics, and teach-outs exploring similar topics in a wider context are mapped as sides of a triangle, the question becomes: *What, if any, are the connections and direction of travel between each element?*

This formulation means remaining open to the relationship between these different elements, rather than – for example - assuming that teach-out topics

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[12] https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10185/UCUBAN54-HE-pay-claim-2019-20/pdf/UCUBAN54.pdf?utm_source=lyr-ucu-members&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=members&utm_term=he-full-jnches&utm_content=Higher+education+joint+unions+pay+claim+2019-20

[13] https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10412/Prevent-is-under-review

[14] https://edinburghteachouts.wordpress.com/

simply reflect UCU policy. Answering this more complex question calls for a very different type of research.

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