**Introduction**

*“Language, unlike speaking, is something that we can study separately… whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous…language is concrete”* Ferdinand De Saussure

Ferdinand De Saussure is widely acknowledged as the father of linguistics, and indeed, “Saussure’s standing as the founder of modern linguistics remains unchallenged more than half a century after his death” (Harris, 2013, p.xiv). Saussure’s work signalled the linguistic turn and structuralism (Walton, 2012) and “the revolution Saussure ushered in has rightly been described as ‘Copernican’” (Harris, 2013, p.xv). For Saussure (1919), language was a system acquired through an apprenticeship in a community of speakers, and although a purely arbitrary system of form rather than substance, once a bond had been formed in the brain of an individual between a linguistic ‘signifier’ (i.e. word) and its ‘signified’ (i.e. object or concept), then the language was fixed, and this form was concrete. For Saussure, a key distinction was made between diachronic linguistics, where over time the system of language could change through the modification and replacement of individual items (Saussure, 1919); and synchronic linguistics, meaning that for an individual, and a generation, once the system of language they had been apprenticed in was fixed in the brain, it did not change. This synchronic linguistics then constituted a concrete form of language system for an individual, as “language stands out as a well-defined entity… external to the individual, who by himself is powerless either to create it, or to modify it” (Saussure, 1919, p.31). There have been post-structuralist critiques of Saussure (Derrida 1976, 1982), arguing that the sign could not constitute a transcendental meaning for every case, although such critiques have been suggested to be attacking 1960s structuralism rather than Saussure as such (Daylight, 2011). What is more, the idea that language as a system is concrete, and can be taken away from its context for the purposes of analysis and teaching, even if it is recognised that language may differ according to elements such as genre, still today underpins whole fields of study of language, such as corpus linguistics (McEnery & Hardie, 2012), genre analysis (Swales, 1990), and much of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006).

If approaches to supporting students are guided by the fundamental idea that language in this view, as an abstract objectivist (Voloshinov, 1929) entity, is concrete and can be removed from its context for analysis and teaching in a student support context, the implications are extensive. We can, for any level and any student, tell them what is expected of them when they are asked to ‘critically evaluate’ or ‘describe’, what the difference is between an ‘essay’ or a ‘report’, and also how such assessment tasks should be structured and approached. We could support students through the use of online glossaries, and also through acontextualised induction and ongoing sessions to help support students. For neoliberalism, we argue this view of language as being an abstract objectivist entity is highly appealing in both direct and also indirect ways. In direct ways, it allows neoliberalism to argue that the virtual forms of support (cf. McCarthy, 2009) that are set up present definitions of a fixed and concrete entity that supports students, provided they are responsibilized (Bonnano, 2017) individuals who access the support themselves. Such a view of language underpins arguments made by neoliberal approaches that support exists for a whole range of students from direct entrants, to part time students, to international students, and any individual who has not been through the ‘traditional’ route to university. In addition, another direct appeal is that, as the language is fixed and similar to any context, arguments can be made that such support can be delivered by those who do not need subject mastery. Thus, it can be argued such support can be relatively low cost (cf. Olsen & Peters, 2005), in that those who deliver it do not need substantive subject expertise, do not therefore require large salaries, and can be employed on temporary contracts (UCU, 2013). Furthermore, materials do not need to be rewritten each time, and online glossaries, once in place, require little attention. Thus, bottom line fiscalization is more easily achieved (cf. McCarthy, 2009).

Regarding indirect appeals of this approach for neoliberalism, the existence of such support allows arguments to be made for ‘massification’ (Thornton, 2017) without the need to provide extra specialist staff or time. This is because if lecturers and students are struggling with workload or studies, the support exists to help them. In other words, it allows institutions to argue to lecturers that they can accommodate more students, and lecturers do not need to invest large amounts of time in helping them, as the support exists to help those students unfamiliar with assessment forms and techniques. In addition, the existence of such support can be marketed to students and, if the institution itself adheres to the view that language is concrete, it can feel reassured that it is supporting such students. Not only this, but if students do not do well, or do not access such support, it can be argued that they are not being responsible, or responsibilized (Bonnano, 2017) to take care they do not fail, or they are not resilient (Hill & Larner, 2017). Thus, we argue, the persuasive power of the arguments neoliberalism draws on are underpinned by this view of language, and we present this visually here in Figure 1.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

However, what if this view of language was erroneous? What if, in fact, language was not concrete, not homogeneous, and could not be removed, analysed, and taught to everyone, by almost anyone? What if, instead, language were highly individual and subjective (Voloshinov, 1929) and very much linked to its context of use (Bakhtin, 1981)? and what were ostensibly the ‘same’ words were in actual fact very differently used and understood in each subject area (Author & Author, 2014, 2016)? Moreover, what if those staff supporting students required a strong knowledge of the subject context to help students with such language? If this was indeed the case, then this would also have a number of implications for the validity of the arguments that neoliberalism draws upon. For example, when arguing to lecturers and students that support exists in the form of online glossaries, such arguments could be refuted by noting that this support is based on a view of language that does not represent the reality of what students need to understand, and that instead, students need support through dialogue in the subject context with individuals who are experts in the subject domain.

In this paper, we argue that language is not concrete and homogeneous, but is instead individual and subjective, and that dialogue in the subject context is fundamental to how it should be taught, and to how students should be supported. We take the language theories of Valentin Voloshinov (1929) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and use them (or plug them in (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Jackson & Mazzei, 2013)) to read how a body of data from interviews and focus groups with lecturers reflects the individual subjective nature of language and the importance of dialogue in the subject context to supporting students. Based on these results we question the validity of the arguments used to facilitate neoliberalism’s persuasive power, and substantiate arguments to resist neoliberalism that can be presented to those responsible for policies regarding student support. We stress we are in no way against massification, and would in fact aspire to achieving 100% of the population to attend HE. However, we argue that current approaches to help support students need to be recalibrated to reflect the individual subjective nature of language, and the importance of context specific dialogue in the subject.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First we make a case for how an abstract objectivist view of language underpins the persuasive power of neoliberalism by reviewing literature on neoliberalism (particularly in HE) and considering how a selection of current materials and workshops used by universities to support students are grounded in this view. Secondly we present theory to make the case that language should be viewed instead as an individual and subjectivist entity, and of the fundamentally important role of dialogue in the subject context to the meaning and use of language. Then, we describe how we collected our data, where it is from, and how we analysed it. Following this we present and analyse examples of our data and finally, we discuss how it can be used to inform arguments to divest (cf. Moyes, Richards & Woods, 2017) from current approaches to supporting students, and invest in ways to support students grounded in approaches that recognise the individual subjective nature of language, and the importance of the need for dialogue with specialists in the subject context. In this way, we question the validity of the arguments that are used to facilitate current neoliberal approaches to student support, and thereby resist neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism in HE and approaches and resources to support students**

Although challenging to define (Davies & Bansel, 2007) neoliberalism is argued to be all consuming and all-encompassing of both private and public sector (Olsen & Peters, 2005). It has been said that in neoliberalism the “individual citizen becomes a homo economicus and every single area of social, cultural, and political life is reduced to the simple economic principles of cost-benefit, production, and efficiency” (Brown 2003, p.9; cf. Becker, 1976). Key to most manifestations of neoliberalism are the concepts of ‘cost-benefit’, ‘production’, and ‘efficiency’. Such concepts are embedded in Foucault’s (1982) ideas of governmentality, including technologies of power and domination, and also technologies of the self, dating back to Ancient Greek ideas, and based on the principles “constituted in Greek as epimelesthai sautou, "to take care of yourself", "the concern with self", "to be concerned, to take care of yourself" (Foucault, 1982, n.p). In this way, the individual becomes ‘responsibilized’ (Bonnano, 2017) and is intended to take care of themselves, a key tenet of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which is central to much neoliberalism. Here, behaviour is revolutionized in virtually all areas of life including marriage, work, and also education, as part of a use of “scarce means to competing ends” (Becker, 1976), and individuals are expected to invest in themselves through education, in order to compete in the market. As Bansel (2007, p.285) writes, in this neoliberal approach: “Citizens, in the name of their own self-interest, are to take responsibility for their own conduct and its consequences. In this way responsibilities for education, health, welfare, security and mutual care become the responsibility of the individual rather than the state.” As part of this responsibilization, individuals have to deal with significant amounts of uncertainty, something which is, in neoliberalism, positive, a necessary and desirable component of the free market system (Friedman 1962), to which individuals must respond to and cope with by being resilient (Hill & Larner, 2017). Further, any inequalities are both a positive reflection of the functioning of the market, and aspects that will be corrected by the market (Bonnano, 2017).

In terms of the roles of the individual and the state, Friedman (1962), Hayek (1948), and Becker (1976), all promote the private sphere and the individual as taking over from the role of the state in many areas of life. They are thus symbiotically linked in that the state’s role is to shift responsibility to the individual, and to create conditions for the individual to be responsibilized and able to compete in the market to contribute their Human Capital to the development of the market and system. Although the state intervenes to protect ‘negative freedoms’, for example the right to not be prevented from developing (Plant, 2010), in most forms of neoliberalism, “social problems and their solutions are primarily the outcomes of individual choices and initiatives” (Bonnano, 2017, 184).

In a specific education context, neoliberalism has been said to encroach itself through *virtualization*, “or the process of managing the university as an online community and a paperless world” (McCarthy, 2009, p242); *vocalization,* “or the insistence on consistently derived and derivable returns on education” (ibid) and *fiscalization,* “or bottom-line budgeting as the ruling measure of viability of all departments and units of educational institutions” (ibid.). Education has been said to fully endorse Human Capital Theory (Connell, 2013) so that today, “schools and universities have arguably been reconfigured to produce the highly individualized, responsibilized subjects” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.248). Arguably, neoliberalism has been able to assemble itself in education through application and practice of these components. Assemblage thinking (Higgins & Larner, 2017) focuses on how processes are formed by heterogeneous actants and helps effectively understand how entities and systems emerge. In Li’s (2007) summary, constitutive practices of assemblage for any system are to forge alignments between the aims of different groups (here students and HE); to render issues technical (here the support); to authorize knowledge; to manage failures and contradictions; being anti-politics, for example by “inviting citizen participation but circumscribing the agenda” and; reassembling by “adding new components and altering existing elements” (Li, 2007, p.265). Assemblage thinking also helps reveal complexities and contradictions within systems. Specifically, it can help see how neoliberalism has not only helped deal with resistance by focusing it on the corporation and the individual (Bonnano, 2017), but can also help see how practices such as charity and volunteering can be underpinned by social and fully ethical motivations yet use this affect to help “neoliberalism to stabilize” (Hoffman & Reidun St John, 2017, p 248). The way in which neoliberalism has assembled itself in education has arguably limited and circumvented many of the ways education should function. Such moves put serious curbs on the ability for critique (Thornton, 2015) and dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) between students and lecturers. The latter being key to education, with learning requiring ‘authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects’ (Freire 1989, p. 49), and which may require assumptions about certain elements (such as the nature of language) to be suspended (Bohm, 1996).

With regard to the resources universities have to support students, almost without exception universities have online glossaries of key assessment terms such as ‘describe’ and ‘evaluate’, and of exercises and explanations that help students understand what an ‘essay’ or a ‘report’ is. These cover aspects such as how to write a ‘critical literature summary’ (University of Edinburgh[[1]](#footnote-1)) or ask students to ‘figure out what the task word means (e.g. discuss, describe, argue)’ (University of Birmingham). Glossaries are provided to explain what task words mean, for example ‘Analyse: Break an issue into its constituent parts. Look in depth at each part using supporting arguments and evidence for and against as well as how these interrelate to one another’ (University of Leicester) or have sections describing assignments generically such as a critical review: ‘A critical review is a type of essay which has the purpose of **evaluating** all, or part of, a research article, an artwork or some other type of work’ (Sydney University). Workshops are given in ‘Introduction to Critical Writing’ (Sydney University), in ‘Essay writing from Start to Finish’ (University of Toronto) and ‘essay writing’ (Victoria University). Centers can help with “writing assistance to all University divisions, schools, and academic and administrative programs” (University of Chicago), and often have ‘StudyHub’ type resources (Victoria University).

In almost every case we have studied, such resources and support are delivered from a central unit, have online materials, and contain a glossary of key terms for students. Even where we find that some institutions have specific school based support centres and help, the main central help and glossaries still remain (e.g. at the University of Cambridge). Critically, in each case we argue that such support and resources meet all the criteria for the forms of neoliberalism in education and HE. Students are expected to be responsibilized individuals (cf. Bonnano, 2017) to access the help available, phrases such as ‘The University has lots of support to help you’ (Victoria) abound, as do headings such as ‘Help Yourself’ (Sydney University). What is more, a huge amount of the support available is online, and therefore virtualised, thus meeting the bottom line drive to fiscalization and replicability neoliberalism desires (cf. McCarthy, 2009). Units that deliver workshops do so from the perspective that how to approach ‘essays’ or ‘critical reviewing’ can be taught through a workshop to students separate from the subject, and to all and any subject group (cf. Saussure, 1919). Such resources and approaches must, inevitably, be grounded in a view of language that sees it as being an entity that can be taken away from its context for analysis, and which is homogenous and concrete. Only if language were such an abstract objectivist entity could it be taken from any subject context and defined for all to refer to.

**Differing views of language: Abstract Objectivist and Individual Subjectivist**

A key critique of Saussure was written in 1929 by Valentin Voloshinov of the Bakhtin school but was not translated into English until the 1970s, and thus remained almost unknown in the West (certainly as far as we can see it is not referred to by post-structuralist critics such as Derrida). Voloshinov critiques the work of Saussure as being based upon a view of language that sees language as being abstract objectivist, or as an entity that is concrete and homogenous and can be removed from context for the purposes of analysis and pedagogy. Instead, so Voloshinov argued, language is more appropriately viewed as creative, constantly evolving and changing: an individual subjectivist entity. As such, language is unique to the speaker, and contains many underpinning or underlying psychological and ideological elements. In this view of language the ‘text’ of the language, its words, only represent ‘the inert crust, the hardened lava of language creativity’ (Voloshinov, 1929, p.48). Their context of use is absolutely critical to the meaning and understanding of the language (Voloshinov, 1929, cf. Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), it will be unique in psychological elements to their subjects (Author & Author, 2016) and will contain key non-textual elements that also play a fundamentally important role in their meaning in each specific subject, such as visual or emotional elements (Author & Author, 2018). Dialogue in the language’s context of use is key for the construction of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) and to pedagogy (Freire, 1989), and language and thought are said to be inextricably linked: “the meaning of a word represents such a close amalgam of thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or a phenomenon of thought” (Vygotsky, 1934, p.120; cf. Wittgenstein, 1953).

In this view of language, support to help students understand what is required of them when asked questions using terms such as ‘critically evaluate’ or to understand what is required in a ‘report’ could not be presented acontextually online. In this view of language, universally applicable and concrete definitions would have little relevance to specific subjects, as each subject would appropriate and use individual approaches to ‘reports’, to ‘analysis’ and to ‘critical evaluation’. Instead, rather than providing support aligned with neoliberalism, that assumed that responsibilized individuals need to care for themselves and invest in their human capital, what would be required is an approach that recognised the individual subjectivist nature of language, whereby the university established and provided more subject based expertise to support students. In practice, what would be required would be an approach which questioned the validity of the arguments that neoliberalism draws on to support its approach to support. Instead, what would be needed would be contextualised dialogue to convey and explain concepts, something that would require those helping the students to have extensive subject knowledge and ability, in order to be able to explain to students exactly what ‘critically analyse’ entailed in their own subject (Author & Author, 2018) or what exactly a ‘report’ was.

**Data collection**

Our data comes from past and ongoing projects researching student support. One project involved focus groups with students and lecturers about their understandings of assessment task words (Author & Author, 2014). Another involved interviews and focus groups with lecturers where we asked questions about what ‘English’ it was felt students needed in the subjects of Nursing, Design, Business and Computing (Author & Author, 2016; Author & Author, 2016; 2017). A third project involved interviews with lecturers where we used a physical object as a focus, and asked lecturers how it would be ‘described’ and ‘critically analysed’ in their subjects of Nursing, Psychology, Design, and Engineering (Author and Author, 2017; 2018). Our approach to analysis has always started with transcription (cf. Bird, 2005). In earlier projects we then drew on constructivist grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2011) to search for emerging codes in the data. In later projects, we began to expand and develop approaches to analysis such as through diffractive (Mazzei, 2014) analysis, where we would read the data using both our own search for emerging themes and also with reference to theory.

Alongside the individual goals of each of these projects, we began to suspect that, when taken as a whole, the data could shed light on something new. This was that it may illustrate how lecturers and students saw their subject language to be individual and subjective, and also illustrate how lecturers supported students through dialogue in their own specific subject contexts. We were able to recall occasional examples of this and wanted to explore the data further. Our desire to do this led us to try and expand the diffractive approach to analysis we had been using and adopt an approach where we would ‘plug-in’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) theory to the whole text of our data from all projects.

The process of ‘plugging in’ sees a text as an assemblage of a number of different perspectives and viewpoints, or “multiplicities” (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, p.24) that can reveal many different elements. In order to reveal these elements it asks questions of these texts from the perspective of a particular theory. As such, the text is not considered to be representative of a particular reality, rather it can represent a multitude of realities, which can be discovered by reading the text as data through the lens of a particular theory. In this way, the process of plugging in “positions both data and theory as machines and reveals both their supple substance and their machinic potential to interrupt and transform other machines” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p.261). For example, if Foucauldian Panopticist Theory (Foucault 1979) is plugged into a data set, the question asked of the data could be something such as ‘To what extent does the data reveal evidence of surveillance and control of individuals?’

In our case, we took the entire text of our data from previous projects, totalling over 350,000 words of data, and carefully combed through it. We did this and ‘plugged in’ theories to analyse it. Specifically, we plugged the theories of Voloshinov and Bakhtin into our data to reveal their ‘supple substance’ and their ‘machinic potential to interrupt and transform’ the machine of neoliberalism. Specifically, when we plugged in the individual subjectivist language theory of Voloshinov, the question we asked of the data was ‘**Does our body of data suggest that language in subjects is individual and subjective?’** Also, when we plugged in the dialogic theory of Bakhtin, the question we asked was **‘How does our body of data reveal ways in which successful support requires subject context based dialogue?’** We now present and analyse the results of this process.

**Results and Analysis**.

**Does our body of data suggest that language in subjects is individual and subjective?**

In our data, we see many illustrations and examples of the language being seen as being individual and subjective. One way was how different groups of people interpreted language. For example, with the word ‘discuss’, for UK based lecturers from China, there was little ambiguity, for them there was no *“ambiguity in this one. It should be clear”.* Yet, for UK students, ‘discuss’ was anathema, one student saying *“I hate this one”* and *“I don’t know really know what it means to ‘discuss’ and I often failed on it.”* Another UK student related a similar dislike of ‘discuss’, saying that *“I read somewhere in one book, that discuss means that you have to highlight the most important points of certain arguments and either compare or contrast them”* but when asked if this made sense to them replied with an emphatic *“No!”* The specific context was noted by the students, one saying that ‘discuss’ *“all depends on the question or what it actually is you’ve been asked to do”.* Similarly, UK lecturers highlighted extreme complexity with the word ‘discuss’. One lecturer commented that *“’discuss’ must contain the elements of a think ‘critically appraise….’analyse review’ it’s got ‘synthesis’ it’s got ‘scholarship’ it’s got the lot in ‘discuss’.”* Another lecturer commented that, *“when you ‘discuss’ something you’re expecting students to be able to bring in additional knowledge….talk around this subject as well as about this subject put it into its context…..the student needs to be able to place it within its subject domain.”* Also with the term ‘summarise’, UK based lecturers from China felt summarise was simply *“to make a conclusion. There shouldn’t be any ambiguity in this one.”*  Yet, UK lecturers felt ‘summarise’ was anything but devoid of ambiguity, one saying *that “it’s a difficult one because it’s synthesizing stuff…I might ask it in a viva because then you’re expecting the student to be able to look at the body of knowledge that they have…..to have gone through a process of reflection and then to be able to say because it’s such a hard thing to do.”* Thus, if the different groups were to be directed to online glossaries where terms such as ‘discuss’ were described out of context this gave them scant support, as the student above outlined with the word ‘discuss’. Here then, the language was not concrete (contra. Saussure, 1919), it was instead something very individual to different groups.

Related to this was the fact that ‘culture’ could also have immense implications on the way language was individual and subjective. For example, in Mental Health nursing, one lecturer commented how *“Mental health is very culturally based, if you go to France…the Czech republic… Finland or you go to Zimbabwe mental health and mental illness is understood differently in each country”* and that *“in terms of language issues there are certainly some times when it’s quite clear the person isn’t picking up the subtlety of what’s taking place, they take a very kind of simplistic surface view of things.”* Some lecturers also considered culture to influence student understanding and approaches to language, for example that if their educational background was from a particular environment, then some *“Masters students find it very difficult to critically analyse because they don’t want to be critical of anybody or anything”.* Importantly, ‘culture’ would not be simply geographically based in terms of countries, but also in terms of the type of institution students had been to, and were coming from. As one lecturer commented, *“a lot of our students… maybe this sounds a bit snobbish but, who come through access courses, through FE colleges, they sometimes are quite not as well educated as some other students.”* Thus, individual backgrounds and experiences will very much affect how different people see and use language such as ‘critical analysis’, which would arguably not be something that could be conveyed in an online glossary or a generic definition without specific subject based dialogue.

The individual nature of language was also evident in subject specific interpretations and expectations. For example, in engineering, for *“a ‘critical evaluation’ implicit in that is an assessment of whether it may be simply be right or wrong…..it’s a valuation, an amount, a number, a counting, a value.”* Similarly, with ‘describe’, an engineering lecturer commented that *“If I say ‘describe’ the soil my lawyer sister would say well it’s wet and muddy and grey or brown or maybe white if it’s a China clay but to actually get an engineer’s ‘description’ of soil requires certain tests requires certain calculations and you plot that on the chart and that gives you your description…you must target your description for the right audience.”* Also in engineering, one lecturer joked in relation to the word ‘trace’: *“don’t ask the engineers that they’ll be out with the greaseproof paper drawing pictures, ‘trace’ I did that folding over toilet paper copying shapes.”*

Similarly with the term ‘Illustrate’, whereas for one lecturer in film studies this would be to *“support your argument with what somebody else has said about it”* for another lecturer in computing they would expect diagrams and pictures, noting they *“would always say ‘illustrate’ using diagrams or figures or whatever always”.* Also with the term ‘sophisticated’, in Design would be *“the ability to apply critical thought to context…very much about a hermeneutics of design, what does it mean, how does it mean and explain that interpretative process.”* In Design, ‘critical’ would also be very much individual to the subject, as *“the critical component is… that ability to contextualise and see shifts in time and offer interpretation.”* However, in some branches of engineering, for ‘critical evaluation’, one lecturer commented that *“you would hope they would be concerned with things like volume, and how much volume does it hold. Kind of measure it. Is it designed in a way that is helpful, how hot does it get, does the handle get hot? I would expect them to take an engineering slant on it. Look for a way to measure if it is fit for purpose.”*

Expectations of ‘analysis’ were also individual and subjective according to the subject. One lecturer commented that *“even when it says ‘analyse’, I don’t mind their answer whether it comes in bullet point form provided the content is correct, I don’t require continuous prose”.* However, in direct response another lecturer commented *“Ah you see I’m strict about that sort of thing I do expect students to attempt prose”.* And yet, in materials design, a student analysis would be based on calculations, *“and there are valuations based on performance characteristics… you’ve done all this analysis you’ve checked the various graphs how do they match up? What is the efficiency?”*

With all these cases, the language and terminology was inextricably linked with the specific subject it was used in (cf. Author & Author, 2016). Each subject appropriated and understood each term uniquely. None of these unique appropriations could be conveyed by an online glossary, or by a centralised unit delivering introductory classes of the same nature to each group of students. Inevitably, such glossaries and introductory classes have to be based in the view that language can be abstracted and taught outside of its context of use. This in turn helps universities believe they are delivering support that can be made generic, is replicable, and can mean that specialist knowledge is not required for any of the massification (Thornton, 2017) and that little support is needed for the virtualization, both of which enable bottom line fiscalization (McCarthy, 2009). Yet, as the above data shows, arguments that neoliberalism relies on to underpin such support are invalid given the inherently individual and subjective nature of the language here.

What is more, in our data we see many examples of assessment types being also individual and subjective. For example, a ‘report’ would differ depending on the subject being written about, for one lecturer, *“a business report…. differs from an academic report…a business report is less obsessed with in-line citations, more focused on identifying and communicating implications and next steps.”* In contrast, for another lecturer, *“a report is a collection of various aspects of the project which is going to be put together as a formal document and sent back to somebody who is of fairly high level”* but that for the students ‘report’ *“just means it’s a coursework… not necessarily a report in the way I’m talking about.”* Also, for another lecturer, students would be required to write a ‘technical report’, and a *“technical report is not an academic report it is an industrial-based technical report. There is no literature review… very practical based… go through all different tests to evaluate the material and properties and they have to write a report to tell me what the material is made of.”* Thus, online and virtual webpages would not be able to convey the exact requirements or nature of what a report is for all subjects if they were to acknowledge this individual and subjective nature.

Another way in which the individual and subjective nature of the language was illustrated was in how people’s understandings of words and language had changed and developed over time (contra. Saussure, 1919). For one student, the meanings of the words would be very different in workplace and academic contexts, saying *“before I worked in factories and I never really critically evaluated anything. You do account for, you do discuss and you do explain”* but in an academic context, *“you kind of targeted it to book work rather than”* the workplace. Another student commented directly how they learned many words through error and had, *“had no warning that they actually mean something completely different in an academic context than they mean in normal context.”* This student also noted how it was only when they read *“other academic”* sources that they understood what to do, and not in *“the introduction class, what’s it called… study skills… biggest waste of time in my life”.* Lecturers also commented on how their own understandings of words had changed over time, one noting that *“my understanding of all of these words has changed hugely since I was at university.”* Here then, language changed over time for the individuals, it was not a concrete synchronic form (contra. Saussure, 1919). Rather, it was individual to the extent that it would change for an individual.

**‘How does our body of data reveal ways in which successful support requires subject context based dialogue?’**

The data contained repeated references to the importance of context (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), one Design lecturer saying that *“that’s where English is horrendous because a student will get hold of what they think the meaning of something is and then the moment you take that word and put it into a different context completely blows them out of the water.”* Similarly, a Nursing lecturer commented: *“context changes all the time, you’ve got to get the concept in context if you’re going to really understand what’s going on and what the person is saying”*. As one UK based lecturer noted, *“don’t forget… every single module is different you’re assessing something in one module you’re going to get a completely different set of answers you know from another one…it’s so specifically situational.”* The fundamentally important role of context was also underlined by students, one commenting that *“I’m told to ‘critically evaluate’ what I’ve learned so far and I haven’t been able to transfer that because I haven’t learnt anything so far.”*

Nor was a dictionary considered to help greatly as its definitions were removed from context (cf. Bakhtin, 1986). In the words of one computing student, *“the dictionary will tell you what it means… but it doesn’t tell you how to put it into context it might give you… maybe one sentence containing the word but it’ll no turn round to me and say… in user experience I need to use ethnography in this kind of context.”* Similarly, nursing lecturers would comment on how terms such as ‘attachment’ and ‘vulnerability’ would have dictionary definitions that were not necessarily adequate for the profession, so that students *“may have had an understanding of what the term means but not necessarily the concept of the theory within the profession.”* As another lecturer commented, *“I’m teaching students a lot of stuff. Some of that they can acquire but you know what? They really, really need to know their subject.”* Thus, rather than being removable from its context for teaching and analysis, language was individual and subjective and had to be taught in context. Without this happening, the meanings and definitions students would be given ostensibly as ‘support’ were of very little help.

One way lecturers helped support students would be to contextualise what was expected of a task word. For example, one lecturer commented that *“what we would like students to do is to understand what it means to do an examination and what does this verb actually mean so we put the emphasis of the meaning on what the word expects them to carry out rather than what the word expects them to be able to yield.”* Here then, it was essential to put the words into the context of use for the students. Clearly, this could only be done by someone with the necessary subject expertise.

The importance of teaching the knowledge needed through dialogue in the context were also commented on. One lecturer related how ‘critical thinking’ was often taught acontextually, but that this was ineffective. Instead, they related how they taught critical thinking *“with my second year fluid mechanics students… premarked their lab report submissions went over them in a tutorial handed them back and said right hand them in next week and I’ll mark the second version… class average up by 10%.”* Similarly, another lecturer related how they would look at drafts for nursing students, and that *“a half to a third of students will submit drafts”* which was extremely helpful for grades as there are *“issues around assessment terms”* in that *“when you say ‘explain’ do they know what is meant by ‘explain’? and… often they present written work that is superficial or descriptive and then you say to them this is, you know, this, in feedback, they don’t understand, I’ve just realised they don’t understand what is meant by that so then you have to explain in your feedback what is meant by that.”* Importantly, this lecturer commented that *“we have smaller numbers than other programmes”* and thus looking at drafts was a possibility, for others this would inevitably be more challenging as for their modules, *“as of September we will go to one intake of probably around 400 students, and I will then expect about 250 will be in my module once a year.”* In some specific types of nursing, lecturers would say to students that for terms such as ‘vulnerability’, ‘attachment’ or ‘resilience’ that *“they [the students] could go to a normal dictionary and look at the term but then we would say to them actually there’s difficulties with the dictionary definition and this is what it means and there’s literature actually in evidence to support that debate.”* So what the lecturers would then do is to *“introduce the theory and there are key concepts within that theory that then they will develop an understanding of.”*

Here then, the ways lecturers were able to support students specifically required significant resource, but unless they were able to do this, the pass mark would not be as high, and thus to assume that the students could do so as responsibilized (Bonnano, 2007) and resilient (Higgins & Larner, 2017) by going to decontextualized generic support and glossaries has to be a false assumption. Only by seeing the individual and subjective nature of the language through dialogue in its subject context would students be properly supported.

Indeed, it was often only dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) that could help, and knowledge of the subject was a key to this dialogue. Speaking of one student who had asked about Marketing after a tutorial, one lecturer commented that *“I really had to explain it chapter and verse to her”.* Similarly, another lecturer spoke about explaining the individual nuances of different jargon in leadership to students, commenting on the importance of *“trying to explain to them how the terms have developed over time and explain to them very often these terms have been developed for kind of, for marketing purposes as much as anything else”.* This lecturer commented that *“it’s not so much the vocabulary they struggle with, it’s the context and how the words are used.”* Another lecturer spoke about a student who had struggled but continually asked questions after class and as a result of engaging in dialogue in this way, successfully learned what was required: *“she would always be there… at 5.00… outside the office… she realised very early I’m struggling here…her dissertation blossomed from the back end of January.”*

Dialogue was also key in explaining what was required to students. One design lecturer commented on how they *“always explain the marking criteria… I often put it up on a slide….but I don’t actually know how useful that is because the terms are specialist terms….specific to the module really.”* Notably, this lecturer spoke of an approach whereby a Masters student from a particular country had been employed as a translator to help other students from that country with the subject material. This person *“was great and we didn’t have fails when [he/she] was there… she had a masters in Design… she understood the context of the language…[he/she] didn’t want to leave but it was a funding issue.”*

Here then, what was essential was to ensure that dialogue occurred in the subject context in order to be able to successfully convey the individual and subjective meaning of the language students needed. Support for students thus required dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) to help them see the words appropriated.

**Conclusion: effectively supporting students and invalidating the arguments used by neoliberalism to justify approaches to student support.**

In this paper we have argued that a particular, abstract objectivist, view of language that sees language as being concrete and fixed, and as an entity that can be removed for analysis and teaching, is one that underpins and gives neoliberalism persuasive power to justify moves in education to massify and virtualise with little investment, and thereby to bottom line fiscalise. Such a view of language allows institutions to argue that the creation of online glossaries can illustrate to students what is meant by ‘describe’ and ‘discuss’, and that centralised units can deliver workshops on what an ‘essay’ or a ‘report’ is to students. In turn, this allows institutions to argue to lecturers that they can teach large numbers of students because the support exists to help these students. Concomitantly, it allows institutions to market themselves to students by claiming that the support exists for students if they need it, and that they should be responsibilized and resilient to access the support.

We have argued that this view is false, and that instead, language should be seen as an individual and subjective entity that is continually changing, and to which its context of use is fundamental. We have illustrated this latter argument through analysing a large body of data from a number of projects by ‘plugging in’ to the data the theoretical lenses of Voloshinov’s theory of individual subjectivism, and Bakhtin’s theory of the importance of dialogue. Specifically, we used these lenses to find examples and illustrations of how language is individual and subjective, and to demonstrate the key role of dialogue in context to how lecturers supported students. Of these we find numerous examples that show how individual subjects contextualise and use language in completely unique ways; and of how these factors play a fundamentally important role in how students can best be supported by lecturers. These ways not only highlight how the arguments that students can be supported through decontextualized and generic support glossaries and classes are invalid, but at the same time highlight exactly what we need to do to support students more effectively.

We suggest that by arguing that language is individual and subjective and that subject based dialogue with individuals who have subject specialist knowledge is essential to help support students in their subjects. Further, that such points invalidate the arguments drawn on by neoliberalism that online ‘one size fits all’ explanations of key assessment words and tasks such as essays or reports are sufficient. Instead, we argue that there is a need to divest from such approaches and to invest in approaches where virtualization has to be supplemented by subject contextualised assistance. In turn, these materials and this support will need to be developed and delivered by those with subject expertise, which would mean individuals delivering the material would need to have background and experience in the subject, and be remunerated accordingly, thus resisting bottom-line fiscalization. Ultimately, this would then help to appropriately support the issues raised by massification, and better empower students and lecturers. We end by presenting visually in Figure 2 below how we feel this can be done. We take Figure 1 from above and ‘invert’ and ‘reverse’ it to suggest how neoliberalism can be resisted by seeing language as individual and subjective entity, and emphasizing the critical role of dialogue in the subject with those knowledgeable about the subject matter. The success of neoliberalism rests on the foundation of having validity for its arguments. In current approaches to support for students these arguments are claimed to be valid based on an abstract objectivist view of language. We have presented and discussed data to show that such a view of language is false, and thereby that the validity of the arguments neoliberalism uses to facilitate its success are questionable. We hope these arguments can be used to resist neoliberalism, and ultimately help more effectively support students.

**Insert Figure 2 here**

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1. For bibliographic details of these sources please see Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)