This paper explores the discursive construction of time in people’s accounts of their workplace experience. In ethnographic research on workplace literacies, particularly focusing on bureaucratic demands, I have identified the importance of a range of clashes between people’s descriptions of their work as they experience it, and how the planning and accountability paperwork they are required to complete implicitly defines that work.

This paper focuses on temporal aspects of those clashes. It is framed within Adam’s complexification of the notion of social time (eg Adam 2000) as including the time frames within which social activity is conducted; unidirectional and irreversible temporalities of things, events and processes; tempo (speed and intensity); and timing and synchronisation. She also recognizes continua of past-present-future and duration-instantaneity, and aspects of rhythm in events. This contrasts with dominant notions of ‘time’ as a uniform, linear, neutral measure.

I analyse interviews with people working in educational settings, exploring discursive realisations of temporal clashes in people’s narrative accounts of their working lives and paperwork demands. These include, for instance, clashes between the time frames assumed by quality and accountability paperwork like lesson plan formats and schemes of work, and those respondents constructed associated with responding to students’ needs and progress, both in the moment, and in their development over time.

I demonstrate how dominant simple metaphors describing difficulties with paperwork, such as the material ‘excessive loads’ or the binary ‘work-life balance’, are not enough to capture the complexities of the temporal challenges which people are navigating in their working lives, as they negotiate the different temporal aspects of work as they live it, and as they are required to produce written accounts of it.


Keywords: time, work, accountability literacies.