

Teaching within a Consumer Model of Higher Education

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Abstract

The political economy of higher education has transformed our ways of thinking about knowledge, teaching and learning, and labour relations. As students are increasingly seeking to attend a university that, they perceive, will offer them the best entry point into the global market place, the work of university teachers is transforming. This literature presents a critical discussion of sociological aspects of consumerism in higher education as it seeks to highlight notions that feed our current conceptualization of consumerism. Furthermore, it articulates a number of critical consequences of teaching to a consumerist ideology. These findings suggest that numerous pedagogical strategies have been implemented in response to the current political economic climate of higher education, and that curriculum has become increasingly responsive to stakeholders in higher education as well as the strategic positioning of programs within the institution and the global labour market. This discussion is framed by a discourse of labour relations.

Introduction

It has become increasingly visible that the global landscape of postsecondary education is laden with politics, policies, and market influences (Bruneau & Savage, 2002; Buchbinder & Newson, 1990; 1988; Fisher, Rubenson, Jones, & Shanahan, 2008; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In the current political climate, fused notions of corporatization, neoliberalism, and degree shopping are common (Badley, 2005; Buchbinder, 1993; Slaughter, 1998). Universities are affected by their surrounding environments, at both the societal and the political levels. They are also agents in the production of these environments (Newson, 1994). The knowledge that is produced within the university, and acquired by students, is communicated and shared with those external to the university. Consequently, higher education produces knowledge, while the state, to a certain degree, influences and directs the knowledge being produced. In other words, what works is what matters to the economy (Ozga & Jones, 2006).

Students who commence postsecondary education with a “degree purchasing orientation” (Brotheridge & Lee, 2005) affect the everyday work of university teaching within the institution. Drawing from Katz and Henry’s (1993) work, I refer to *university teachers* as anyone who is employed within the university in a teaching capacity. University teachers design and employ lesson plans and learning material, engage with students, and organize courses that students take in order to complete their program and receive their degree.

This review of literature critically explores how the work of university teachers is transforming in response to consumer and market demands. Throughout, I draw upon critical literature on academic restructuring, consumerism, and the political-economy of higher education in Canada to provide an important context for the discussion. The paper begins with a discussion of a discourse of labour relations to both frame and underpin the dialogue of a consumer ideology within postsecondary education. It also engages in a discussion of teaching to the student

consumer where a number of consequences to one's university teaching work will be articulated. Although the primary emphasis of this paper is on students commencing undergraduate education, the discussion may also be extended to those commencing a graduate level education.

Discourse of Labour Relations

In this section, I explain how a discourse of labour relations both underpins and informs a consumer ideological vision of higher education. Ultimately, this discussion informs one's understanding of how the work of university teaching is transforming to meet the needs of the student consumer.

Tremendous changes are occurring in both undergraduate and graduate education, as well as in professional schools. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) theorize these changes as a shift "from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" (p. 8). Participation rates in degree programs are influenced by the growth of the knowledge economy and its desire to hire qualified professionals (Giroux, 2004). This view is consistent with Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) theory of academic capitalism, which posits that higher education (including faculty, management, students, and stakeholders), is woven into the new economy. The new economy treats advanced knowledge as "raw material" (p. 15) that may be marketed as products and services. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue that because universities are perceived as a critical source of transferable knowledge, they are in the process of forming new and stronger relationships within the global economy. Consequently, Canadians, particularly those contemplating the commencement of postsecondary education, are increasingly responding to the 'perceived' needs of the global labour market.

Emerging is the discourse of the paying customer, which is a critical aspect in a neoliberal agenda (Bourdieu, 1998; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Singh, Keyway, & Apple, 2005). Apple (2005) puts forth:

For neoliberals, the world in essence is a vast supermarket. "Consumer choice" is the guarantor of (market) democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television (p. 215).

Democracy, in effect, becomes an economic concept. Apple (2005) suggests that these changes, as a part of the neoliberal perspective, are continuously impacting the creation of closer ties between education and the economy. The result is a surplus of proposals and programs tying school to work and employment.

Carroll and Beaton (2000) argue that the privileging of the market has increased one's acceptance of business values in the organization of society and public institutions, such as universities. Beaton (1999) defines the corporate ideal as being a set of principles that locate the university as a private corporation consisting of Total Quality Management (TQM), Quality Assurance (QA), and comprehensive auditing procedures. He argues that with the shift to a business mindset in the university, teaching becomes justified based principally upon their economic utility. Beaton (1999) further states that increasing emphasis is placed upon curriculum and university programs that are directly related to the labour market, and that this may become the standard for how university teaching may be assessed.

It becomes possible to perceive the university as a space of capital accumulation through the training of skilled graduates. In fact, Codd (2005) argues that the "central aim of education becomes the narrow instrumental one of preparing people for the job market" (p. 196). Moreover, he suggests that education within a neoliberal paradigm has become an asset for human capital. This notion is consistent with Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) view that - "neoliberal states move resources away from social welfare functions toward production functions" (p. 20). This may be achieved through competition and the shifting of economic control from the public sector to the private sector.

The private sector is governed by supply and demand, is geared to customer demands, and is highly competitive, whereas the public sector is heavily reliant on collective needs, is open to citizens, thrives on fair distribution of public goods and supports the democratic rights of every citizen. In Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) conceptualization of universities shifting from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime, the public good knowledge regime is characterized as valuing knowledge as a public good to which all may lay claim. The academic capitalist knowledge regime, however, values knowledge

privatization and profit taking. In essence, “knowledge is construed as a private good” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 29).

The turn towards the private sector is encouraged by Canadian government, both provincially and federally, in addition to non-governmental agencies. The Canadian Corporate-Higher Education Forum is one such example of a non-governmental agency which seeks a marriage between industry and postsecondary education (Arthur, 2004; Buchbinder, 1993). Consequently, this increases the pressure of production and transfer of knowledge within the institution. Buchbinder (1993) suggests that the “outcome is a turbulent situation which transforms the university as it struggles to reconcile the pushes and pulls of the information society, on the one hand, and the globalization of capital on the other” (pp. 331-332). With increasing collaboration of postsecondary education and the global labour market, it becomes increasingly difficult to strip notions of consumerism from those seeking to profit from them. This is of particular relevance to students completing a degree in higher education, as they are seeking employment and a wage post-graduation.

Brown and Lauder (1996) suggest that market influences produce efficient, skilled agents who ensure the correspondence of supply and demand for trained labour. Since employers must also accept the risk of losing their investment, their employee, they might not want to invest heavily in the training of that individual (Brown & Lauder, 1996). Moreover, if the market proves to be non-responsive and no profit is incurred, despite having trained employees, then there will be a loss of investment. As Apple (2005) suggests, in the marrying of education and employment, the idea is that those entering into the labour market are already highly educated and appropriately trained workers. Consequently, university teachers are a necessary part of this supply and demand relationship as they are responsible for teaching or delivering what are deemed to be appropriate skills and marketable knowledge to their student-consumers. This reinforces the transformation of university teachers’ work as it is informed by a consumer ideology and exists within a discourse of labour relations.

Consumer Ideology

In this article, consumerism emerges as an ideology, giving meaning to the discourse of labour relations. I refer to a definition of ideology as being a set of ideas living in discourse and giving them meaning rather than being independent from discourse (Goldberg, 2005). Goldberg (2005) states that discourse exists as evidence of ideology and, moreover, that it “can be deconstructed to expose its influence on material effects” (p. 159). In this paper, the discourse of labour relations exists as evidence of a consumer ideology, and through its deconstruction the consequences to university teaching may be exposed.

Stromquist (2002) posits that much of the globalization discourse refers to the global market place which takes on concrete forms as business firms on the supply side and clients on the demand side. As identified earlier within this article, within an educational context, the university would be identified as the firm producing knowledge for students/clients who then become consumers of education. Brotheridge and Lee (2005) define the notion of a degree-purchasing orientation as “a view of education in which students value education primarily as a vehicle for labour market participation rather than as an avenue for learning” (p. 74). From this orientation, students must recognize the need to attend institutions that offer them the most “bang for their buck” and to enroll in programs that provide them with the most opportunity and preparedness to enter the workforce upon graduation (Wellen, 2005). Students enter higher education as consumers seeking, what they believe to be, the “best” educational product available – the guarantee that the degree that they receive upon graduation will place them in a competitive position within the labour market (Brotheridge & Lee, 2005).

More than ever before, students are struggling to gain admittance into programmes or institutions that are perceived to be specialized and prestigious (Wellen, 2005). Brown and Lauder (1996) offer that “the economic needs of the nation will be met through the market, because when people have to pay for education they are more likely to make investment decisions which will realize an economic return (p. 7). Rather than entering postsecondary education with the desire to learn or create knowledge, students as consumers perceive the attainment of a higher education degree as a means to successfully enter into the labour market (Wellen, 2005). In other words, the degree as a recognizable and tangible entity is meant to signal competence and knowledge in a specialized area.

Wellen (2005) observes that if a good is private, it would be better for the whole of society if it were provided through the market. This suggests that the student consumer would weigh the merits of a higher education degree against its cost, although it is probable that many students do this regardless of the market, albeit for different reasons. Critically, higher education creates values and benefits that cannot be priced by the market, which may not be realized if the choice of product/higher education becomes a consumer transaction. “Education is thus conceived as a private commodity for the individual degree holder rather than a public good that serves the interests of citizens of the society as a whole” (Newson, 1994, p. 148).

In Beaton’s (1999) conceptualization of the student as a purchaser of a service or product, the “customer” mentality encourages the exchange of a good, money in exchange for a degree, rather than of knowledge. Education, thus, becomes a tool to promise a better future for all citizens – as long as they can each pay for it. It cannot be surprising that students are currently being referred to as “customers” and “consumers” (rather than learners) any more than faculty are being defined by their ability to secure funding and grants (rather than by their ability to teach) from corporations and the private sector (Giroux, 2003). Ultimately, this shift in values has implications for university teaching as humanistic, educative relationships are reconstructed as consumer transactions (Noddings, 1988).

Teaching to the Higher Education Consumer

In the following section, I discuss a number of consequences to one’s university teaching work when teaching to a consumerist ideology as articulated in the literature. This discussion focuses on the implementation of higher education policies to meet the demands of university stakeholders, as well as the modification of curriculum.

Policy Implementation

Gewirtz (1997) observes that the everyday work of teachers is always influenced by their students, the available resources, the school system, the actual physical and social space in which they work, and the managerial practices of administration. Consequently, numerous pedagogical strategies and new learning models – the development of technologies for learning and instruction – have been implemented as a survival mechanism in response to the current political economic climate of higher education (Buchbinder & Rajagopal, 1996). Furthermore, these models and strategies have been developed to help shape political, economic, and educational changes toward a knowledge-based and globalized economy (Mulderrig, 2011; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004). Ozga and Jones (2006) suggest that this is a:

policy trajectory that is preoccupied with the construction of a “knowledge economy” and “learning society.” Within this trajectory schooling/education/training systems are acknowledged to be significant instruments of economic and social change (p. 2).

Although higher education policies are often developed and mandated by university management and external arms-length government bodies, the work of implementing and embedding them in the classroom is up to the university teacher.

In response to key university stakeholders, there has been a shift towards the inclusion of learning expectations and the development of qualifications frameworks. One such example are the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which are measurements on which institutions are required to report in order to receive performance-based funding from the Ontario government (Bruneau & Savage, 2002). In 1993, Edward DeRosiers was commissioned by Premier Rae’s Council of Economic Renewal and its *Task Force on Lifelong Learning*, to write a document entitled *An Information Framework Linking Educational Outcomes to Economic Renewal*. This document noted that it had little interest in performance, but rather in the meeting of the human resource requirements of the province’s economy (Bruneau & Savage, 2002). As stated previously in this article, many students are commencing degrees in higher education with the expectation that they will successfully be able to enter into the global labour market and secure employment. Having an understanding of a province’s human resource requirements reinforces both the discourse of labour relations and a consumer ideology.

In 1998-1999, Ontario’s Conservative government introduced KPI’s. A steering committee was established to develop the indicators, subsequently mandating that all institutions provide information for students on graduation

rates, graduate employment rates, and OSAP student loan default rates. In the following year, the Ontario government made public its plan to link postsecondary education funding to institutional performance – the Performance Fund (OCUFA, 2006). This act is critical as the performance fund bases their division of funds upon how the universities meet their graduation and school to work employment rates.

In 2003, a new funding portfolio with attached performance indicators was allocated. Each university was required to develop an institutional quality plan ('Multi-Year Accountability Agreements' or MYAAs) to demonstrate how funding would be used for hiring, for buying resources, for the improvement of student services, and for the development of new programs. A postsecondary review, entitled, *Ontario: A Leader in Learning* (Rae, 2005), popularly referred to as the 'Rae Report,' anticipated that both provincial and institutional performance measures would be included in these multi-year plans. The claim was that performance measures could help students make educational choices and could play a role in increasing public confidence in higher education.

Accountability frameworks have become another widespread initiative to assist in the communication of the skills and qualities possessed by each institution's graduates. This response by the universities is meant to articulate the competencies they expect their graduates to emerge with, including preparedness for the global labour market. We have such a framework in Ontario with the introduction of *University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations* (UUDLEs) and *Graduate Degree Level Expectations* (GDLES) (Council of Ontario Universities, 2004). UUDLEs was a province-wide initiative to coordinate higher education institutions in the Province of Ontario as commensurable with other institutions in both national and international contexts. UUDLEs is a policy implemented in the publicly-assisted universities of Ontario that has mandated that the work of university teaching be articulated through the use of outcomes, expectations, and standards. The UUDLEs framework "elaborates the intellectual and creative development of students and the acquisition of relevant skills that have been widely, yet implicitly, understood" (Council of Universities, 2006, p. 9). While students make choices about which institution they wish to attend, UUDLEs facilitates the decision-making process whereby university teachers are required to articulate these very competencies, at both course and program level, through the use of outcomes-based learning.

The implementation of policies and pedagogical strategies has become an everyday part of university teaching work as it responds to the demands of the consumers. Rowland (2000) states that these forms of action – performance measures, standardization, quality control procedures, centralization of management, and the influences of the global market – limit professional control of academics, as they encourage little thought and produce results that serve only to provide measures of student satisfaction – not of educational value.

Curriculum Modification

With the transformation from social knowledge to market knowledge, universities are in the process of forming new relations with the global economy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Consequently, university teachers are then required to achieve institutional goals set out to be publicly accountable, pass program reviews, adhere to higher education policy, and teach within an appropriate framework to meet student needs. The focus is to improve quality and customer satisfaction, activities which are in addition to an already heavy workload (Beaton, 1999).

Lincoln (1991) states that university teachers do not, as of yet, know how to effectively respond or act on behalf of student consumers. One of the many responses to the increasing marketization and privatization of the new corporate university is to modify the curriculum. For example, DeAngelis (1998) states that higher education has enlarged its curricula and diversified its teaching methods in its attempt to provide more diversified and interdisciplinary programs. As a result of these new developments, the function of faculty is transformed (Nixon, Marks, Rowland, & Walker, 2001). Curriculum is also being transformed in order to meet these increasing demands.

The provision of courses is a critical area of university strategy as students apply to specific universities (nationally and internationally) based on the courses and the programs offered and not simply based on the institution itself. Universities are required to make a number of strategic decisions about which courses to offer, as well as the distribution of the number of student places across schools and departments. Global educational trends and policy trajectories are influencing these decisions. Since university teachers are responsible for the development and delivery of course curriculum "their professional interests cannot be separated easily from the organization and purpose of the work they do, which is guided by academic policy" (Newson & Buchbinder, 1988, pp. 39-40).

Consequently, curriculum has become increasingly responsive to stakeholders in higher education, which originate outside of the institution and provide the motivation to create programs (Slaughter, 2002). Slaughter (2002) suggests that curriculum planners need to consider the implementation of new curricula, while faculty and administrators will be forced to strategically position programs within the institution and more broadly within the global labour market. These programs need to be implemented widely and require the assurance of prestige and faculty resources, as well as high-paying careers for students, in order to be successful (Slaughter, 2002). It remains questionable, however, if this assurance is possible as this model of higher education assumes the success of one's career according to level of income as a marker of achievement.

This begs the question of who, ultimately, is responsible for student achievement, student outcomes in the labour market, and the meeting of performance indicators. Axelrod (1990) offers that university teachers have to address the relevance of the curriculum they deliver to the needs of the labour market by attempting "to make university officials and policy makers understand that higher education is neither capable of rescuing economies nor of accurately anticipating long term labour force demands – a challenge that has, to date, confounded business and government themselves" (pp. 12-13). The universities may be able to produce qualified workers and producers of knowledge, but they cannot create jobs for them. The work done by university teachers is subject to pressure from the global market place.

Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this paper, postsecondary education is increasingly being transformed by external market pressures and influences. Thus, the implications for this research are located at both societal and educational levels as universities are being restructured to meet the needs of market forces and achieving objectives designated by university management and stakeholders.

Market ideologies have also infiltrated our current ways of thinking and teaching in higher education. Those within the university are challenged to find ways to meet student, staff, and financial needs within the university, as well as navigate the increasing market pressures placed upon them. University stakeholders, students, parents, administrators, industry, and government for example, have been captured by the rhetoric surrounding degree shopping and the attainment of an education that will offer successful and comfortable futures. The work of university teachers is also shifting, as it is being reconfigured to meet these demands. Moreover, university teachers must find ways in which they may continue their teaching work alongside the dominance of the existing ideology.

This research invites those involved to look at their own work introspectively and further posits that this reflection will enable participants to become agents of change. The ways in which university teachers talk about teaching, reflect on their teaching, value teaching, and participate in professional development related to teaching are what can shape and reshape a common vision. The location of higher education in a consumer ideology and the discourse of labour relations signifies that both the content and form of university teachers' work must meet the needs of the student consumer. "Hence any adequate understanding of teachers' work necessarily involves a serious consideration of the immediate school environment and the wider contexts within which schools are located" (Gewirtz, 1997, p. 219). With an understanding of the consumer ideology, university teaching may bring in examples from the labour market through the use of experiential education, for example. This may be in addition to the use of clear learning objectives in course design and delivery.

What needs to occur, as a form of discourse, in response to the significant changes occurring in higher education, is a critical discussion about how the work of university teachers is continuously changing – and certainly changing in ways that reflect the needs of both students/consumers and university teachers in higher education. Hammerness (2006) articulates that "Teachers with powerful visions of the possible and the desirable can imbue their colleagues with such ideals, thereby influencing the kind of school context that makes a real difference" (pp. ix-x). This new vision of the possible may occur alongside of a consumer ideology to improve both student learning and the everyday experiences of those teaching in higher education.

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