

"The Virtues and Vices of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Today"

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I would like to begin by thanking Frances Deepwell for inviting me and therefore affording me the honour of addressing today's conference. I must say, knowing the reputation of Oxford Brookes in terms of excellence in teaching and learning, has made me feel quite nervous about giving this talk and given the choice, I would probably have preferred to speak at your sister university. I would also like to thank Professor John Raftery for his warm welcome.

As has already been hinted at in pre conference publicity my job today is to ruffle a few feathers, to provoke you to reflect on your personal motivation, values and practices in HE, but particularly to encourage you to question the assumptions with which you may have been conceptualising teaching and learning. In the presentation I will explore the ways in which, due to a complex set of social, cultural and political factors, the identities and practices of academics in higher education have been impacted on in recent times. These factors are associated with, amongst other things, the widening participation and expansion agenda, marketisation and the attendant growth of managerialism and performance regimes, the development of e learning, the global economic crisis and the professionalization and regulation of higher education teaching. Against this backdrop, my central argument will be that, whilst much of this change is irresistible, we need to be wary about 'throwing out the baby with the bath water'. In this regard, I will argue that there are some essential 'virtues' about the academic enterprise that are relatively stable and universal and therefore worth reiterating. To develop this argument I will explore the values of teaching and learning through the perspective of the concept of 'virtue ethics' originally developed by Aristotle, but also reflected in idea of 'critical pedagogy' and the work of Paulo Freire. In doing so, I want to emphasise the dangers of over emphasising technical aspects of teaching and learning and conversely underemphasising the moral and social dimension.

In terms of my method, I was thinking of doing something really creative like asking for a panel of volunteers and doing is as a kind of 'have I got news for you quiz

show' with me being the presenter, but I lost the nerve, so will sadly be totally reliant on the lecture format supported by powerpoint and questions/contributions at the end.

Just to get the reflective juices flowing I would like you to jot down in one or two sentences your personal philosophy of education. To help you with your thinking here is my personal view about education:

"Education is absolutely essential to democratic life because it has the potential to be transformative, to enable individuals, through being informed and inspired to become social actors and make informed judgements about the world. In this sense, education has the potential to expand dignity, equity, human rights and freedom. This mission should underpin all other mission statements."

The present climate, both political and economic is one that is completely dominated by the crisis of the banking sector and the capacity of governments throughout the western world being able to keep them afloat (Cowden, 2010). For our sector this is proving to be extremely significant because these conditions expose the weaknesses and corruptibility of systems driven by the logics of unregulated markets, i.e. the logics of neoliberalism. The crisis, has highlighted the 'bankruptcy, literally and figuratively', (Cowden, 2010 p24) of a political ideology and administrative practices in which Market' considerations trumps all other considerations and where the 'individual' rather than collective interest would prevail.

One of the most powerful effects that this ideology has had on HE is to encourage fragmentation within the sector through the encouragement of a business ethos, resulting in 'commodified, hyper-managed and anti-intellectual forms of knowledge production'. In this sense, many ways, education is already political. It always has been; we do not need Freire to remind us that there is no such thing as a neutral, uncommitted or apolitical education. Mark Fisher (2009) has recently pointed out that this 'politicisation' isn't simply a given but is a product of a series of interventions, as he notes "politicization requires a political agent because educational institutions in this country have become so deeply incorporated into the dominant logics of power, and because compliance with -- and indeed acceptance of -- this logic is enforced through mechanisms of professional discipline, control and exclusion, schools and universities have once again become primary sites of political struggle.

How does this impact educators? Well, for some/many it has meant constant restructure, reorganisation, more pressure, and for some loss of jobs and departments, take for example the closing of the philosophy department at Middlesex University and at Kings College because the courses were simply not bringing in enough money. For those that chose to resist, the most basic practices of critical, ethical and politically conscious pedagogy become political acts, and many once-straightforward matters of professional/academic discretion, have become matters of political principle. This is true in other fields as well: health professionals, artists, social workers all suggest that it is increasingly difficult to work within existing social institutions with any kind of personal or professional integrity, so alienated have these institutions become from the basic principles of public service and individual autonomy that even the mainstream professions have been built around.

The commodification of HE, i.e. the tie up of education to a business ethos, something that both Peter Mandelson the previous Labour Education Minister and David Willits the present incumbent have emphasis, runs the danger of what Tariq Ali in a recent speech at the student occupation at Middlesex University the creation of “*Kentucky fried education*’. This he describes as being, and I quote, “cheap, quick, fast; you swallow it and you barely digest it and you excrete it”.

Prompted by the debate surrounding the REF and the need to demonstrate impact, in a similar vein Anthony Grafton in piece in the New York Review of Books (9th March 2010) entitled ‘Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities, highlights the dangers of an approach to research and teaching that devalues academics, which is simply driven by market trends,. Using a the metaphor of food and cooking he talks about the need to avoid the culture of targets and the kinds of student assessment that elevated instant gratification over slow realisation or form over substance:

“Accept the short term as your standard – support only what students want to study right now and outside agencies want to fund right now – and you lose the future. The subjects and methods that will matter most in twenty years are often the ones that nobody values very much right now. Slow scholarship – like Slow Food – is deeper and richer and more nourishing than the fast stuff. But it takes longer to make, and to do it properly, you have to employ eccentric people who insist on doing things their way”.

Stuart Hall here spells out the relationship between Managerialism and Neo-liberalism, and the extent of its influence on teaching, on funding of courses and on research. As Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar (2009) have noted in their work on the ‘Neo-Liberal University’, the same processes which have been used in high schools have been similarly deployed in HE, where under a populist rhetoric of participation, consumer choice and flexibility a market-driven form of

managerialism dominates. For them, the process of marketisation is essentially deployed as an instrument to extract 'more for less', i.e. a 'disciplinary apparatus to create greater efficiencies' (p4). Commodification, is more of a process where social good and transactions, such as the delivery of teaching and learning, are turned into commodities, hence the idea that students are no longer students but customers and staff are 'service providers' and 'income generators'.

Whilst one might accept that many of these changes are simply irresistible, I have yet to speak with one member of staff that is happy about what is happening; and no one can doubt that these moves are having a dramatic impact on both the idea of a university and the role of academics. In perhaps the most erudite exposition of the corrosive impact of market driven reforms in HE Mark Fisher points out how, in a kind of internalisation of oppression we as educators are being increasingly drawn the implementation of the very things we see as causing us untold misery.

Mark Fisher in his book entitled *Capitalist realism* comments on this condition of bureaucratisation of teaching and learning, of pedagogy if you like. Accelerated by the wonders of information technology in particular, he suggests that bureaucracy is so pervasive that in effect it is not longer something 'out there' but has colonised our very beingness to the extent where we find it difficult to imagine being anything else. Not a question of I think therefore I am, but "I fill out forms, therefore I am". And of course the battery of bureaucratic procedures is not confined to HE but can be found in most public services.

If these reforms create confusions for academics then equally they throw up contradictions for students. The glossy brochures, elaborate complaints mechanisms, online resources, course packs, detailed coursework guidance and endless student surveys may give them a sense power and influence in reality such a consumerist approach, suggest can lead to an impoverished learning experience where critical thinking, discovery and self efficacy is substituted for instrumentalist, standardised approaches that require universities to have good progression rates and degree classifications in order to maintain or even improve their position in league tables. One consequence for students, as has been happening in schools for many years is that parents, teachers begin to collude to focus on results and nothing else. As Cannan and Shumar (2009) suggest, this can lead to a limiting of creative and critical capacities and encouraging their "dulling down" (p7)

One of the main influences this has on pedagogy is that the craft of teaching is replaced by a series of standardised managerial mantras - the importance of widening participation, the centrality of raising retention, the necessity of teaching diverse student groups, the importance of employer engagement. This is not to say that any of these ideas are necessarily bad, but what do they mean? However, the

underlying reasons for these strategies disappear within their proclaimed self-evident value.

Alongside this is the point which Giroux (1988) makes about the profound anti-intellectualism of the neo-liberal vision of the university, as the classroom becomes a place where students are passively trained for rote learned information – the sense that ideas could be interesting, exciting or even dare I say it transformative is entirely lost. Teaching in the contemporary university is understood through a language of skills and competencies which far from the ideological neutrality it claims, strips out ideas, replacing them with formulas. In effect students are deprived of the opportunity to encounter ideas and concepts materials through which they could gain a new or a deeper understanding of their experiences.

This objectification of knowledge makes the neo-liberal university a dehumanised place where students experience of learning for students becomes a disenchanting process of ‘playing the game’, of managing to obtain a 2:1 by doing the least amount of reading and (deep) thinking as possible; evidence in the proliferation of how to do guides, Wikipedia, endless assessment guidance, increasingly shorter and ‘fatter’ modules and term dates, course packs, e reading lists and so on, a kind of Satellite Navigation or Painting by Numbers Approach to Pedagogy. And after we have taken students to the water and helped them to drink we ask them to complete endless tick box surveys to tell us how well we did; and because we are all embroiled in a competitive ratings game, because that is how success is increasingly measured, we hint to the students that a low rating may well be damaging to their future prospects. And then what of their future prospects, they spend the rest of their lives worrying about paying off their student loans.

“...notwithstanding modern psychological attempts to derive (moral) educational conclusions from quasi-empirical research alone, it is difficult to see how such conclusions might be justified without appeal, however covert, to specific epistemological, ethical and even political considerations” (p3)

Has its roots in Aristotelian philosophical thought and contrasts from:

- Deontological (rules based) approaches – e.g. Lying is always wrong
- Teleological (Outcomes based) – e.g. Lying is acceptable in some situations

Like deontology and teleology, virtue ethics are concerned with which actions a person should take in any given scenario. However, virtue theorists argue that developing morally desirable virtues for their own sake will help aid moral actors when such decisions need to be made. Hence it is based on the development of ‘good’ character and behaviour rather than beliefs alone:

“being virtuous is more than having a particular habit of acting, e.g. generosity. Rather, it means having a fundamental set of related virtues that enable a person to live and act morally well”

(James F Keenan, Proposing Cardinal Virtues, Theological Studies, 1995)

The development of virtue is based on three aspects of personal development: arete (excellence linked to craft and creativity), phronesis (practical wisdom linked to the need to address real problems by developing moral will and moral skill), and eudaimonia (human flourishing which is based on nurturing reason and intellect. This does not happen overnight, but the role of teacher is important.

Barry Schwartz makes a passionate call for "practical wisdom" as an antidote to a society gone mad with bureaucracy. He argues powerfully that rules often fail us, incentives often backfire, and practical, everyday wisdom will help rebuild our world.

So far it would be reasonable to accuse me of painting something of a bleak, almost dystopian image of HE, which, of course, is far from reality. Thankfully, we have some excellent teaching and learning taking place, not least in this institution which serves something of a beacon to not only the post 1992 institutions but the sector as a whole. So, perhaps despite rather than because of the prevailing dominant ethos discussed earlier, there are some truths about excellent pedagogy that need to be told and I would like now to move onto exploring what I see these to be. I think a starting point has to be a deep level of reflexivity amongst staff working in HE and the moral and human dimension education.

Let me illustrate - when I was a young lad all I wanted to be was a professional footballer. My reason was simple; being paid for doing something I would do for pleasure seemed like a job made in heaven. Well, I never made it as a footballer, but, becoming an academic and being paid to develop myself and others feels like being paid for something that I would do for free. The point is that teaching is no ordinary vocation, as Giroux (2010) points out:

Pedagogy is never innocent. But if it is to be understood and made problematic as a moral and political practice, educators must not only critically question and register their own subjective involvement in how and what they teach, they must also resist calls to transform pedagogy into the mere application of standardized practical methods and techniques. Otherwise, teachers become indifferent to the ethical and political dimensions of their own authority and practice.

In taking up the challenge of critical pedagogy I have been working with a number of colleagues concerned about the neoliberalisation of HE and the possibilities of alternative approaches rooted in the traditions of critical pedagogy and popular education. Here are some core principles that we as conveners of the 'Critical Pedagogy and popular Education Group' have developed.

- develop and advocate pedagogies of engagement, life and hope, aiming to break down the barriers between informal and formal education, old and new universities, research and teaching and between classes and ethnic groups.
- rethink the university as a radically democratic social and political institution and not a business.
- create learning and teaching environments in formal and informal educational spaces that facilitate dialogue, reflexivity and connection to real life needs and that enable the creation of methodologies encouraging and realising more democratic practices
- link activism outside and inside the academy, utilising the insights stemming from both practical engagement with the world and engagement with theory that seeks to understand the world?
- challenge the individualised atomisation and instrumental and fatalist thinking and discourses that neo-liberalism encourages, through in part, its assumption that 'There Is No Alternative' to neo-liberalism .

(Amsler, Canaan, Cowden, Motta and Singh (eds.), 2010)

Regarding this last point, what I say is that there is always an alternative, which sometimes may take the form of resistance and direct action, as in the case of University of California, Middlesex, Sussex and Kings, and I dare say a lot more places over the next few months and years. However, most importantly that resistance begins within our own minds through a realisation that teaching in HE at its best is about being creative, taking risks, having passion, celebrating intellectual pursuits, transformation and most important of all as is reflected in the theme of today's conference collaborating to 'build networks and communities of learning; Its' much easier to be creative and to resist when this is done in collaboration and on one's own and the Critical Pedagogy and popular Education Network is one such attempt to do just that.

I now want to say something about the work of Paulo Freire, because I think if we are to develop these critiques of the commodification of knowledge his work is an essential starting point. In his seminar 1970s text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire

emphasised the fundamentally political nature of pedagogical processes. It is only through recognising this that we could begin to as he called it “humanise the curriculum”. And the good news is that given the choice of an instrumental learning experience or an emancipatory learning experience, most students most of the time will chose the latter.

In a study of over 1000 undergraduate students from both so-called ‘Russell group and Non-Russell group HEI’s Patrick Ainley and Mark Weyers (2009) reveal that the most important priorities identified by across the sector tended to be intrinsic factors associated with interest in their subject, the desire to develop as a person, whereas extrinsic motivators, namely to compete with others and getting a qualification to obtain a good job were ranked lowest. In terms of student approaches to studying, there was consensus across the groups for a preference for deep learning over surface learning (Biggs, 1989) whilst valuing equally instructive teaching and teaching that encouraged autonomy. This paradox I think is partly explained by the ways that today’s students are socialised from primary and secondary education but also reveals a desire to discovery and freedom to learn (Rogers). I can give an example from my own teaching of a 3rd year module that was unashamedly critical and theoretical. Being fed-up with students overuse of Wikipedia and ‘how to do books’ I required students consult original sources. This was met with hostility and threats not only from students but most disappointingly from fellow academics who were insisting that I was being unreasonable and that this was not something they required of students so why should I. I decided to keep my nerve and face up to the wrath of the students during a staff student liaison meeting. What helped me was a profound belief in my own ability as a teacher and an understanding that learning that is of any substance can and is often personally and intellectually challenging. I persisted and to my and my students’ pleasure the module produced some of the most outstanding marks in the year and feedback suggested that it was indeed transformative if not a little painful for a significant number of students.

So what was I doing that made a difference? To answer this question we need to go back to our discussion of the instrumentalisation of education. Stephen Cowden’s (2010) makes a useful analogy between the banking crisis and instrumental education to map a way forward. He argues that this distinction between these two different approaches to pedagogy represents a crucial starting point both for new and more creative approaches to pedagogy at a practical level, and for challenging the managerialised and audit driven approaches to pedagogy discussed earlier.

Just as neoliberal banking created a mirage of ever increasing wealth which turned out to be non-existent, the managerial formulas of neoliberal education are equally empty. Both our neoliberal banks and banking model of “education” are equally empty of what is supposed to be the reason they exist. A crisis of this nature is itself a pedagogical challenge. The conflation of education with training has undermined

student's capacities to pose fundamental questions – at a time when it is urgent that we think differently about how our economic life is organised this is a real problem.

It is in this sense that it becomes so important that we as educators to recover and reinvent the tradition of Critical Pedagogy, and particularly the concept of education as the capacity for critically engaged citizenship. Interestingly, one of the remedies to the banking crisis has been a call to return banks to their original purpose and mode of operation.

In *“The Pedagogy of the Oppressed”* Freire sets out a crucial distinction between two educational approaches - Banking education and Problem solving education. Banking education was for Freire the methodology which reproduced the alienated consciousness of the powerless. The teacher is all-knowing – the students empty. Their emptiness is filled up with the teacher's narration, which is not seen to have any wider connection to the world of the students themselves or the wider world outside the class. The purpose of this type of education was to produce “adaptable manageable beings...[and] the more completely they accept the passive role forced on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (1970:54). While “Banking education” bolstered an oppressive status quo, Freire saw “problem-solving education” as providing the means to challenge these:

“Problem-solving education...consists of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information...Through dialogue...the teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches but who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach...[The teacher] does not regard recognisable objects as his own private property, but as the objects of reflection by himself and his students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students...The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders his earlier considerations, as the students express their own (1970:61-2).

I now want to make two final points about the way in which certain ideas in Critical Pedagogy tradition have been appropriated in ways which strip them of their radical content. One is this notion of “student centred learning” in which teaching comes to be all about exploring student experience – often through reflective logs, portfolios and thick description of experience. As McClaren point out (1993), while allowing students to articulate experience is crucial, there is nothing inherently progressive about focussing teaching solely on experience. The experience does not simply speak romantically or tragically for itself, but is always interpreted through the frame of available discourse. In this sense we need to see experience and intellectual or theoretical frameworks as existing in a dialectical or dialogic relation.

Related to this is the way certain versions of Freire's ideas come to be seen to be all about emotion, seen as good, and rejecting of ideas, seen as cold and dehumanised.

We need to argue for a dialectic of emotion and intellect, and here I use the model of yin and yang – both are profoundly interrelated to each other and are within each other – in the sense that emotions think and ideas have feelings.

This allows us to reject the Manichean opposition between disembodied banking education on one hand, and the idea that all that is needed to be done with this is to recuperate emotion. A central implication of Freire's work is that ideas and feelings exist in a dialectical relationship in which each informs and is within the other. One of the consequences of moving from an elite to mass HE system is that universities become much more subject to the wider ebbs and flows of society; it is no longer exempt from the wider concerns that society has. For some writers like Frank Furedi, the opening up of higher education has resulted in a dumbing down process. I disagree. It is not the widening up that may have reduced standards, but more so the commodification and instrumentalisation of learning. In the process of responding to demands for developing new creative pedagogical approaches, we have I feel thrown out the baby with the bath water. We need to move from a system where intellectuality is seen as something of a vice to promoting mass intellectuality. We all lament the absence of critical thinking, but I feel the solution is not just pedagogical but one of imagination and ontology. I believe this deficit of intellectuality is not only a reflection of student subjectivity but also of our own experience as academics and the institutions that we are working in. So before we seek to teach students how to make slow food, we need to reflect on our own experience and commitments to slow scholarship. Not an easy task when universities seem to work on a 12 month cycle of targets, but one that we cannot afford to ignore.

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