

Neither consumers nor instruments: re-imagining students as citizens

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Abstract

During the period 1984-1999, a neo-liberal model of tertiary education was introduced in New Zealand, which envisaged students as entrepreneurial consumers or autonomous choosers. Since 1999, tertiary education strategy has moved towards a communitarian model. In this paper, I argue that the communitarian model implemented in New Zealand instrumentalises education, so that students are imagined as instruments for achieving preordained economic goals. Development of the human subject is not considered an end in itself; rather education is valuable only when it clearly leads to particular economic outcomes. Both neo-liberal and communitarian models for tertiary education jeopardise students' potential for achieving autonomy and full human flourishing. In contrast, I argue that tertiary education policy should be founded on recognition of students' human dignity and expectation of full human development so that students are envisaged as citizens of a fully inclusive, discursive democracy. In this way, students are more likely to realise their potential for autonomy and full human flourishing (including social responsibility), and society as a whole will be enhanced.

Introduction

The neo-liberal model of tertiary education implemented in New Zealand during the period 1984-1999 has been the subject of extensive analysis and critique (see, for example, Olssen & Morris Matthews, 1997). However, since the election of a Labour-led government in 1999, tertiary education strategy has incorporated certain communitarian features, with government explicitly rejecting the market as a distributive mechanism. While market supporters have questioned the likely efficacy of the new model (see, for example, LaRoque, 2001; Kerr, 2006), there is little evidence of critical academic engagement with the new model. (See Barrett (2007) for a critical analysis of the new strategy in relation to the polytechnic sector.) This apparent academic approval of the Labour-led government's model for tertiary education may be attributable to the new measures ostensibly addressing the failures of the neo-liberal model and the institutional behaviour it encouraged, notably reckless competition. While concurring with critiques of the neo-liberal model, in this paper, which should be considered work in progress, I argue that the communitarian model, as introduced by the Labour-led government, is also undesirable for tertiary education, students and society in general. A key fault lies with the way in which students appear to be imagined as instruments for achieving preordained economic goals.

In opposition to both the neo-liberal and communitarian models, I propose a model for tertiary education under which students are imagined as citizens, and recognised as individuals with immanent human dignity, developing in the society of others.

In briefly assessing each model, I consider its effects on education; students' autonomy; and social outcomes. While I am aware that the traditional concept of autonomy may be considered illusory (see for example, Devine & Irwin, 2005), the Kantian conception of autonomy that "human beings are possessed of a will and are capable of exercising it freely" (Mulhall & Swift, 1995, p.43) provides an appropriate starting point for considering the role of tertiary education. This capacity "is most fundamental to the dignity and worth of human beings because it distinguishes humans from other animals and elevates them above the realm of causally determined nature" (*ibid.*). Thus for Kant (1785), the human person embodies reason, freedom, autonomy and dignity. Similarly, the Catholic philosopher, Michael Novak (1999) argues that what

makes a person is “the capacity to reflect and choose, to be imaginative and creative, to be an originating source of action...Dignity inheres in them because they are destined to be free and reflect and to choose, and thus to be provident over the course of their own lives, responsible for their own actions”. Following Martha Nussbaum, as she has developed Amartya Sen’s work on human development as basic rights (see Nussbaum (2003) on their different approaches), I argue that the principal role of tertiary education is to help students towards the ideal of Kantian autonomy, that is, a “free and independent self, capable of choice” (Sandel, 1984, p.5, discussing John Rawls) by developing each person’s particular “capabilities for fully human functioning” Nussbaum (1999, p.243).

Neo-liberal model

Overview of the model

Neo-liberalism presumes that human behaviour is dominated by self-interest, with social interactions being value-maximising exchanges (Boston, Martin, Pallot & Walsh, 1996, p.17). In the neo-liberal imagination, society is an agglomeration of markets, including a market for tertiary education. To play their proper role, tertiary education institutions (TEIs) must be autonomous and competitive (Olssen 2002a, p.66), and responsive to the consumption choices of students as sovereign consumers (Baker, 1979, p.233). Because this model privileges student choice, the state’s funding contribution is demand-led and input-based, focussing on the number of students who enrol with a particular TEI. (While student fees are presumed to be the principal source of TEI income, in practice, neo-liberal government in New Zealand expected domestic students to pay for no more than a quarter of the cost of their education.)

Education

Once commercialised and subject to market forces, education becomes predominantly imagined as a commodity (Olssen, 2002a, p.63). For students, focus lies on the exchange rather than use value of education. As Stephen Brookfield (2005, p.25) observes, under the conditions of neo-liberalism, education is no longer perceived as a “transformative adult learning experience” but rather as “the pursuit of a qualification that can be exchanged for higher salary and status”. Generally, for students “enmeshed in the cash nexus”, ideals such as peace and freedom “count for much less than getting in, getting qualified, getting employed and getting out of debt” (Trotter, 2007, p.B4). For TEIs, the goals of liberal education, including knowledge, research, inquiry, truth and reason are usurped by the neo-liberal goals of maximising outputs, financial profits and efficiency (Olssen, 2002b, p.45).

Autonomy

Students’ autonomy is problematic under the conditions of neo-liberalism in two principal regards. First, while neo-liberalism ostensibly respects individuals’ autonomy, it is not “a natural outgrowth” of liberalism (Hindess, 1997, p.15). Whereas classical liberals conceived *homo economicus* as an autonomous subject, whose activities should be free from government interference, “neo-liberal *homo economicus* is *manipulable man*, man who is perpetually responsive to modifications in his environment” (Gordon, 1991, p.43). Rather than allowing subjects to find themselves through processes of guided ontological development, free of a predetermined purpose, the neo-liberal project aims to mould students as uncritical entrepreneurs (Fitzsimons, 2002). Second, it is misguided or dishonest to assume that students are always capable of making informed, rational choices that impact considerably on their future lives. Everyone is not “always already an autonomous, rational being” (Devine & Irwin, 2005, p.319). In sum, the educational choices presented to students under the conditions of neo-liberalism are illusory.

Social outcomes

By effecting an increase in control, neo-liberalism engenders docility. It also promotes narrow, short-term perceptions of the needs of individuals and society. And, as Tony Clear (2002) observes, “Generating docile labour units to participate in today’s jobs...will do little to address the broader needs of society”. Furthermore, since tertiary education is seen as an investment in students’ future earning capacities, they are likely to opt for courses that are thought to provide quick returns, such as law, commerce and communications (Kelsey, 2000). Such preferences may cause a dearth of graduates in the sciences, and it is the sciences that may be expected to lead to the knowledge economy that policy planners generally agree is desirable for New Zealand. Indeed, while neo-liberalism does not ostensibly use education as a means of achieving particular social outcomes (despite having that effect), the *Bright Futures* strategy for a knowledge economy, introduced toward the end of the National-led government in 1998, indicated that neo-liberal government lost faith in the market’s ability to deliver the skills needed for a knowledge society (Kelsey, 2000).

Communitarian model

Overview of the model

It may be argued that the model for tertiary education developed by the Labour-led government since 1999 no more than an adaptation of the previous model, as it functions within a neo-liberal economic structure and maintains many of the features of neo-liberal education. Nevertheless, the model may be properly described as communitarian inasmuch as it is sceptical of individual’s independent existence (Mulhall & Swift, 1995, p.10) and privileges the common good over individual rights or utilities (Olssen, 1997, p.404). However, the model must be considered a weak or tainted form of communitarianism. In particular, it retains the features of neo-liberal pedagogy, which Olssen (2002b, p.45) identifies as: “semesterisation, slenderisation of courses; modules; distance learning; summer schools; vocational; Mode 2 knowledge [linked directly to the functional imperatives of the world of work].” Indeed, it is likely that pedagogy will be further influenced by the needs of industry under the new model. A strong communitarian vision for tertiary education could be quite different and would share features with the citizen model I propose. (See Olssen (1997) for a discussion of what may be described as strong or ideal communitarian vision for education.)

Under the new model, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), a crown agent, is responsible for purchasing outputs from TEIs in order to satisfy anticipated labour force requirements. Institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) must engage in negotiations with local stakeholders to ensure their regional relevance, and universities must prove their relevance in relation to national strategy (TEC, 2007). Each TEI must compile an investment plan that justifies their claims to funds. TEC will make allocation decisions and may withhold funds if not satisfied with a TEI’s investment plan. The New Zealand Vice Chancellors’ Committee (2007) sums up the process as, “Institutions merely submit Plans, TEC decides”.

Education

Under the new set up, education is not liberated from what Polanyi (1944, p.73) identified as the “commodity fiction”. Tertiary education continues to be conceived as a commodity, but is one no longer distributed by the market. By acting as a monopsonist that can decide the types and quantities of educational outputs it will purchase, the state has effectively reclaimed that function.

The role of education, mostly implicit in the neo-liberal model, of leading to a knowledge economy is now brought to the fore. The experience and ontological growth inherent in education is not considered an end in itself, rather education is one instrument, among many, for achieving preordained economic

outcomes. In the words of Michael Cullen (2007), the Minister of Tertiary Education, the model is about “what tertiary education can do for New Zealand” in the narrow sense of achieving government’s goals.

Autonomy

Because growth in the tertiary education sector was capped until 1988, government funding was effectively rationed under the neo-liberal model (Doyle, 2005). When capping and thus rationing was scrapped, a latent budget blow out was left for the incoming Labour-led government. By 2005, when expenditure on tertiary education had grown 36% in real terms since it had taken office, government was compelled to take measures to curb costs. Therefore, fiscal concerns may be considered as significant a driver of the new strategy as ideology. Nevertheless, a crucial shift in the way students appear to be imagined does have an ideological basis. Whereas, the neo-liberal model imagined students as sovereign consumers, the communitarian model imagines students as future factors of production, their expectations or utilities being subservient to the government’s conception of the common good. The effect of the communitarian model is to instrumentalise students; to make them tools for achieving preordained economic goals, thereby denying their autonomy. Whereas, under neo-liberalism, the act of consumption equates to the ability to make autonomous choices, it may be inferred, in communitarian thinking, because students make the minor financial contribution to their education, they lack the capacity – or should not be permitted to – exercise autonomous choice. (Perhaps it was coincidental, but a trade-off between responsibility for education costs and autonomy can be discerned: the new strategy was announced coterminous with forgiveness of interest on student debt.)

Social outcomes

The goal of the new model – to achieve a knowledge economy – is not new to New Zealand, and, indeed, is a common objective amongst members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The novelty (or reversion) is the confidence that particular socio-economic goals can be achieved by precise government interventions. It seems fanciful to presume that any form of education policy can, by funding certain activities, elicit specific, desired results from such a complex system.

An attractive feature of the new model is the role of stakeholder consultation in the ITP sector. But it must be questionable whether stakeholders can have genuine input, when the goals of tertiary education have already been decided by central government.

Why neither model is desirable

Both of the models sketched demean education as a process through which individuals, in the society of others, are helped to develop fully as human beings. Both models fudge the distinction between education and training, and treat education as a means of achieving preordained goals, whether this is a society of entrepreneurs or a knowledge economy. Both models are founded on an economic conception of human behaviour and society for which wealth maximisation – whether for individuals or society as a whole – is considered to be the principal goal, and thus the end of the education system. Without denying the importance of economic concerns, this approach to education and governance in general simply fails to capture what it is to be human, and what is important for full lives to be lived in a flourishing society. To paraphrase Karl Polanyi (1944, p.73), to allow economic concerns “to be the sole director of the fate of human beings...result[s] in the demolition of society”. Both models jeopardise students’ potential for self-discovery and growth toward autonomy that is traditionally expected of learning at a tertiary level. (See Hinchcliff (1997, pp.183-186) on the purposes of learning). Ultimately, they fail to pay proper regard to students’ personhood.

Citizen model

Overview

Under the proposed citizen model for tertiary education, students would be recognised as individuals with immanent human dignity, and envisaged as citizens of a fully inclusive, discursive democracy, rather than wealth maximising consumers or instruments for achieving economic ends. In respecting students' dignity, attention would be paid to their full human capabilities, rather than their presumed ability to make rational choices. Nussbaum (1997, pp. 287-288) list the following as central human capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation (friendship and respect); other species; play; and control over one's environment (political and material).

In this scheme, tertiary education would be founded on the recognition of students' as individuals developing their capabilities in the society of others.

A human capabilities approach essentially requires a rejection of narrow economic goals, such as productivity, as the principal aim of education and, indeed, governance in general. Akin to the way in which human development indicators, which take account of a broad range of wellbeing components, have displaced gross domestic product as a measure of a country's success, the citizen model would take a broader view of what is good for people and society. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) argues, "it is not enough to focus on economic growth as a good in itself; one must ask how this growth has affected the opportunities and abilities of each citizen in a wide range of areas of fundamental importance". More specifically, with regard to the relationship between society and productivity, she observes, "Society is held together by a wide range of attachments and concerns, only some of which concern productivity. Productivity is necessary, and even good; but it is not the main end of social life" (Nussbaum, 2006, p.160).

Education

While the classic liberal view holds that "There is nothing over and above education which education seeks along the lines of a means/end model" (Marshall 1981, p.85, discussing R.S. Peters), it is submitted that education should have the explicit goal of assisting human beings to reach their full potential, which can only be achieved in a complex web of reciprocity and cooperation with others. Clearly, then, the purpose of education under the citizen model should not be to ensure that job vacancies are filled. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a person who has been fully included in society will see being a productive member of that society as an aspect of achieving her potential.

Rejection of economic growth as the principal aim of education does not imply that education has no value in economic terms. Higher education generally has positive effects on economic growth (Cohen & Soto, 2002), although not necessarily in a precise, instrumental way. And, even from the narrow perspective of financial investment, tertiary education in New Zealand provides a comfortable positive return for both individuals and government (MoE, 2006). Furthermore, education brings wide and important social benefits that are difficult to capture in economic terms. An educated and literate population increases participation in democratic institutions and promotes social cohesion, better health, less crime and greater life satisfaction (Pells, Steel & Cox, 2004).

Autonomy

A capabilities approach focuses on “what people are actually able to do and to be” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.290). Rather than presuming that students are already fully autonomous, it is understood that many students should be assisted to make-decisions. This requires ongoing inquiry and dialogue about what is appropriate for each individual, about finding her place in the community, instead of pretending that all young people are capable of making critical life decisions themselves. This is essentially a process of inclusion.

The expectations of the included citizen are entwined with but not subservient to those of society as a whole. Nevertheless, we may expect included citizens to be compassionate and to choose to engage in productive labour for the common good, whilst retaining the choice whether or not to do so. As Nussbaum (2006, pp.156-157) explains

In the capabilities approach, the account of the benefits and aims of social cooperation is moralized, and socialized from the very start...it envisages human beings as cooperating out of a wide range of motives, including the love of justice itself, and prominently involving a moralized compassion for those who have less than they need to lead a decent and dignified life.

Ideally, say, a physics student will make the choice to study that subject because it is right for her – taking into account an holistic view of her life and the expectations of others – and will not opt for, say, a commerce degree simply because it appears to offer a quick return on investment from early career earnings. Indeed, the concept of work itself needs to be presented more fully to students. When social arrangements are viewed in investment terms, remuneration becomes the compensation for the disutility of work. But as Will Hutton (1995, p. 231) argues “work is not a disutility. It is a means of acting and interacting with the world that fulfils an individual’s humanity. Work is a supremely social act...It sharpens the capacity to be and to do.”

Social outcomes

Rejection of a communitarian model does imply support for the disinterested governance of classical liberalism. As Jeffrey Abramson (1984, pp.15-16) argues, liberalism has been successful in securing “when the distinction between separate selves is maintained so firmly as to empty politics of its ability to foster shared purposes and common goals, then liberation reaches its limit”. Similarly, Ciaran Cronin (1993, p.xiii) observes that the lack of mutual solidarity of “a moral order based on a contractual agreement among self-interested utility calculators...would lack sufficient normative foundations to sustain community goals”. Thus, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, “We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty” (cited by Minow, 1999, p.554). We should, therefore, strive for to find common goals but those goals should be arrived at through processes of discursive democracy which “is ultimately about involving the stake-holders, i.e., those concerned by a particular social rule, in a deliberative process of mutual persuasion about the normative validity of a particular rule” (Risse, 2004, p.310). Government should not, for example, shy away from providing incentives for students to study courses it considers to be in the general interest. But it is not appropriate for a government that respects its citizens’ autonomy to construct a particular socio-economic goal and then to regulate the entire tertiary education system to that end.

Conclusion

Olssen (1997, p.410) denies the possibility of synthesising liberalism and communitarianism but concedes it is possible “to incorporate certain elements of liberalism into communitarian perspectives or conversely to incorporate communitarianism into liberalism”. The citizen model proposed, despite having features that may be considered communitarian, is essentially liberal because it is founded on the inviolability of the individual. It rejects the communitarian conception of “society as a moral community beyond the individual

[meaning] that any action by the state on behalf of society could in principle be morally permissible, and even morally obligatory” (Graham, 1988, p.16)

The communitarian model for tertiary education, as introduced in New Zealand, operates within the greater framework of a neo-liberal economy, and, rather than an ideologically coherent model, may be seen as little more than a means of rationing scarce funds. As Cullen (2007) observes, “It is no coincidence that I am both Finance Minister and Minister of Tertiary Education”. Nevertheless, an ideological shift has taken place away from neo-liberalism. First, decisions regarding the allocation of funds will be made by a central agency, rather than in accordance with market signals. Second, students appear to be envisaged as future workers, rather than consumer-entrepreneurs. While these developments may be attractive to the many who oppose neo-liberalism, tertiary education should be informed by the goal of fostering the human capabilities of all participants, not the commodification or instrumentalisation of either education or students.

As long as students are required to make a significant contribution to the cost of their tertiary education, many will study courses that are perceived to provide quick returns on investment. If it is implausible that, in student’s eyes, tertiary education can be disconnected from such an ends/means perception, it can, at least, be reconnected to the multiplicity of goals of a full life. A rejection of the dominant neo-liberal discourse, with its belief in individual wealth maximisation, (and, indeed, communitarianism with its goal of maximising group wealth) would bring education more in line with how people really aspire and think. Focus would then rest on the true drivers of human happiness, such as sociability, trust, community harmony and psychic peace (Layard 2005, pp.227-231).

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