Dear Customer, there is no stock exchange for wisdom

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Abstract

*I could have bought the book and taught myself. I don’t know what I paid my fees for*

Distance student feedback

I am tempted to be dismissive: “If you are clever enough to realise you could have taught yourself, how come you can’t figure out what you paid for?” Instead I will take the criticism seriously, for the student has raised *the* educational question of our time: is education an industry?

Beginning with “what were my fees for” I examine the everyday commonplace ways in which education is commodified and what this does to students, educators and institutions. That higher education functions as a means of social stratification and perpetuates injustice is not a novel insight (and of course this not all and only what higher education does) but scrutinising how current everyday expressions and practices link with one another to create a tapestry that articulates social injustice helps us resist. In the face of ‘deliverables’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘learning outcomes’, ‘employability’, the difficulties of offering new courses, the politics of assessment, forms of feedback and other paraphernalia of current higher education practice we see how challenging social injustice in higher education is often a matter of fighting a myriad of seemingly petty battles. The apparently reasonable view that a student who pays fees is in some sense an entitled customer leads to a form of violence in which student, educator, university and host society are all profoundly diminished.

Jennifer Case decries education construed in predominantly instrumental and economic terms, but rightly has reservations about Sen’s concept of human flourishing. We cannot assume that students have had a chance to and wish to continue to explore what they value doing in life and we should note how casting the student as customer pre-empts such exploration. McArthur asks if it is possible to reveal and resist the forces that distort our ability to pursue internal integrity and human fulfilment. I try and show how it is possible and how we can in our everyday practice undermine ‘the deal’ and nullify the contract between customer and vending machine. Pace McLean I show how everyday practice in higher education exacerbates initial conditions of inequality and perpetuates the differential access to knowledge and to being heard (epistemic justice), how it obscures how one can ‘get at’ how knowledge is made and distributed (hermeneutic justice) and have a fair share of air time (testimonial justice).

Keywords

higher education, commodification of education, student as customer, social justice, wisdom

**“Hello rational being making informed decisions”**

*What did I pay me fees for? Is this in the exam? What are the learning outcomes of this course? How many references must I have for Assignment 1? How many marks do I get for presentation/referencing?* These are the questions of an intelligent economic actor engaged in an exchange: in exchange for the payment of fees and through providing pre-specified data, the student will get certified. The student is a customer, the lecturer is a service provider and auditor and the university is a credentialing service. As a lecturer/service provider I specify certain auditable performances in line with the guarantees of my employer (the certifying body). This is the deal. Where is the educational process here? If education is related to personal development, where is the person?

Capital tends to commodify all entities to enable the extraction of surplus value. It facilitates the conflation of the economy and the society and ideas such as that, as flawed as the capitalist system may be there is no feasible alternative. It supports the view that society does not exist, but rather a collection of individuals who have complete information and are able to make informed decisions from options that have all had an equal chance of being presented. That these conditions do not exist yet inform government policy has not escaped notice. Nevertheless, they pervade education. The assumptions are not clearly stated in educational policy because they do not have to be. Educational *policy* is developed in the context of the larger political orientation of a government. When that government is already imbued with the fundamental assumptions of capital, there is no need to repeat them in specific educational *policies*. They are implicit and emerge in micro practices justified as effective and efficient. Thus, state schooling ‘inevitably’ reflects the ‘natural’ inequalities in the host society: exchange relations merely reflect reality. Prior developments that created unequal neighbourhoods are obscured. The actual everyday circumstances of disadvantaged communities and non-traditional students are obscured.

This obfuscation is at odds with the concept of education that takes the student to be a seeker where the teacher is not the possessor of what the student seeks, but a facilitator of the students’ quest. This view of education and learning is at odds with an exchange economy. In this view there is a disparity of power, status and authority and there is no possible commodity exchange for even if one could commodify wisdom there is no mechanism for its exchange. Wisdom is not fungible and the student’s acquisition of wisdom is not dependent on an external exchange. It is an internal event. Another way in which education and exchange relations cannot be reconciled is that neither teacher nor student can ever have complete information. All the options can never be available, or even identified. Yes, external circumstances and conditions might facilitate the acquisition of education or wisdom and some more so than others, but there is no possible way the infinite variety of individual beings, the purpose and nature of the quest, all the circumstances, and the skill of the teacher can ever be effectively standardised and audited. ‘The education industry’ is an oxymoron. It means redefining education as a commodity and rendering the individual irrelevant. In this context, recognition of the Other is impossible, and therefore, social justice which depends on the recognition of actual people and communities becomes impossible. Actual access to knowledge and how it is constructed, distributed and shared becomes a product of pre-existing privilege.

The student who realised that she or he could have bought the book and taught him or herself was of course quite right. The question “what are my fees for” deserves an honest answer. A deal’s a deal. The fees pay for the credentialing apparatus and some entertainment. They are not for an education. The vendor cannot guarantee epistemological, hermeneutical or testimonial justice. The issue of social justice in higher education arises because whereas the sale of credentials does not relate to promises of social justice, higher education often does. There are many ways in which this promise is misrepresented. A current popular ‘promise’ is that higher education will make one employable.

Employability: On making yourself useful

To achieve ‘employability’ is, for some, an important outcome of higher education. To be labelled ‘employable’ however, does not carry the same gravitas for others; how much of an achievement is it that someone might consider you useful?

What can it mean to be ‘employable’? It suggests that you can be put to good purpose. It does not tell us anything about what purpose or at whose behest you become employable. Unlike labels such as skilled, or inventive or creative, or descriptions like ‘can fry an egg’, ‘employable’ clearly signals an external locus of control. I can only know if I am employable when I become so, and that – bar the exception of being self-employed – is not under my control. Furthermore, the means to become self-employed are not evenly distributed in a society. The problem with the descriptor ‘employable’ is that it is empty. The University does not guarantee employment, but claims only to produce graduates that are deemed employable without specifying by whom or for what. The University cannot ensure a job but only that, if one were to exist, its graduate *might* be suitable.

What makes us employable? We might like to think is it something about us; our bright minds, our articulate patter, our snappy dress or at least something about our one-minute pitch. The crucial element is rarely stated: someone else makes you employable. To put it crudely, you are employable when someone else deems you useful. To pursue employability is to pursue passivity, the status of biddable being. A kinder gloss may be to say ‘you learn how to fit in’. Not a bad ideal in some ways. But maybe, in a society that is clearly dysfunctional, fitting in might not be a good idea. Being fit for the most senior chief executive offices of corporates like Enron, Exxon, Barclays Bank, Volkswagen, AIG and many others seems to entail a certain level of socio- or psychopathology. The University graduate profile does not indicate that “at the conclusion of this qualification the student will be identifiable as a sociopath or psychopath”. Neither does the University claim that after three years of study the graduate will be employable as a dishwasher or cleaner. It may be that due to the general state of the economy that is the only employment the student will get, but it is not in the graduate profile. What is? Employable. What could it mean?

An obvious answer is to listen to what employers say they want. After all, they are the market for the ‘employables’. Well, no shortage of bumpf on this point. Hardly a week goes by without another sagacious captain of industry or commerce telling us that what employers want. The gist is repeated in various policy documents often in the neat summary form of ‘soft skills’, which seems to amount to having the skill to distinguish between reading a balance sheet and cuddling a loved one and being what Mom and Dad called a well-behaved kid who talks nice. Of course, this has to be translated into modern educo-techno-speak, and it comes out something like *strategic or analytical thinking* or “don’t talk nonsense”, *data reasoning* or “listen and read carefully”, *communications* or “speak clearly, don’t talk with your mouth full, don’t interrupt”, *career management* or “grow up and learn to look after yourself”. (Italized words are from GMAC 2015 Alumni Perspective Survey, quotes from my Mum.) So, on the current reading of education policy, the government requires universities to ensure that the result of three years of higher education is that the student is in the running for a job which may or may not exist depending on factors entirely outside the government’s, the university’s or the student’s control. No government has ever guaranteed jobs for its citizens, nor could it. Neither can it guarantee workers for jobs that do exist. There is also ample evidence that the correlations between qualification, field of employment, success and failure are weak. The government has created the fantasy of a causal link between graduation and employment. How can any single institution be held responsible for maintaining its fantasies? Universities that promise to graduate ‘employables’ are making a specious claim. It is a form of social injustice. One of the ways universities claim to support the fantasy of employability is through the inculcation of transferable skills.

Transferable skills: Jiving at the junction

‘Transferable skills’ is a deft phrase, connotatively rich, synthesizing mobility and alchemy with being able to actually do something. But for all that, it is as empty as ‘employable’. ‘Transferable skills’ in the sense of being able to do something learnt in one context in another, different context is a low-order activity. You can achieve that with a shovel and a wheelbarrow. The ability to use insights or wisdom gained in one context in other different contexts requires the learning to be internalised and transformed into a sensibility, a readiness, a personal attribute. In this sense education cultivates the capacity to apply what one has learnt in one context in other contexts. It is not doing the same thing in different contexts, but transcending context and thus being able to apply *oneself*, or, to put it another way, to apply internalised learning, to any context. This is a profound individual transformative process.

It is via personal transformation that I may learn something in one context, say timing and sequence in ceramic slip-casting, and then abstract from this experience a personal insight that alters my relationship to the world. As a result of this altered relationship I then approach a difficult issue at work that involves new or complex processes, recalcitrant people, or obdurate material conditions and I do so better than I would have done before I did some ceramic slip casting. No amount of book learning and no instructor can guarantee or secure that moment of insight in which one transcends the specifics of one context and becomes able to apply one’s insight in a different context. Insight is not a skill, but an event and at times a mysterious one. Our impatience with this mode of understanding stems from not being able to control and exploit its power. We have lost patience with magic and mystery. We want efficiency and control. So we replace flexible principles with abstract rules. We then get, in place of dynamic process and outcomes that cannot be precisely specified, a short-term impression of success until the system starts to breakdown. And it will break down, because it will have lost the capacity to self-correct and adapt. What happens at large systemic levels happens at the micro-level of individual learning. The ‘efficient’ student asks “Is this in the exam?” In economic terms, this is an intelligent, energy-conserving question. But it is short-term. To use a well-known proverb, it translates into “Will I catch the fish?” The student seeking an education wants to know about fishing. This distinction plays out in larger organizational contexts. We can see it in the difference between the attention paid to the quarterly report and share price, and the attention paid to long-term social and environmental effects. When Exxon decides to fight lawsuits rather than clean oil spills because that is the more economic option it is fulfilling its fiduciary obligations to shareholders. When universities aid and abet the student who asks “Tell me what buttons to press to get the qualification” we are being efficient, but we are also being socially irresponsible and this is a form of injustice. We now look at another instance of socially unjust practice, the micro-practice of promising deliverables.

Deliverables: knowledge as pizza, lecturer as courier

The macdonaldisation of education is familiar. Here I want to analyse the specifics of the expression ‘deliverables’ and connect it to intellectual violation. We can deliver pizzas or a blow to the head but we cannot deliver education. It is just not that kind of stuff or service. It is a non-deliverable. There is nothing I have that I can package up and pass over, so that the student can have it. Higher education is related to the pursuit of wisdom, unless education is understood as training. Wisdom is an individual attribute, is internalised and embodied in a person. It is a way of thinking inextricably entwined with a view of the world and specific values. The only way I can ensure that what I have becomes what the student has is by *ensuring* the student adopts my view and values. This is brain-washing, not education. Insofar then as we insist on deliverables in higher education, we are requiring students to abrogate their own pursuit of wisdom in favour of adopting predetermined perspectives and values. A deliverable may be acquiring a skill. If I pay someone to teach me how to bake a cake, fly a plane or build a house, I want to know, at the end of the course, how to do these things. That is training, not education. Education is a different kind of process. I cannot hold another responsible for my own exploration. However, I *can* and will hold another responsible for limiting my opportunity to explore. With or without fees it would be fraudulent if they purported to support my intellectual quest but in fact subverted it. In this way, to speak of ‘deliverables’ in higher education appeals to some sense of value and efficiency but it is yet another way of reducing a person to a consumer. It is a fraud and an intellectual violation.

A popular metaphor in education is the cultivation of minds. There are associated metaphors. When we introduce deliverables in higher education, we go from ecologically-sensitive gardening to industrial agriculture. We practice monoculture on the intellectual landscape. This is precisely what higher education in the service of neo-liberalism is intended to achieve. It may seem laudable that everyone should go to university, but when this comes with an increasingly centrally-controlled curriculum, it becomes a form of mass mind control. The political control of mind formation – not wisdom – is achieved by diverting attention from substance to form, from what the activity is, to auditing the activity. A recent example is the Australian Government redirecting $18 million of funding from the Promotion of Excellence in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PELTHE) administered by the OLT to fund new transparency and quality control measures.

It is the prerogative of duly elected governments to direct funding where they see fit. A clash of opinion is not a form of social injustice. What is unjust is unrealistic promises made through an obfuscating discourse of ‘employability’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘deliverables’ and other terms expressed in micro-practices that do lead to social injustice. And so, in assessments we have marks linked to specific aspects of performance, and smart students ask questions like *How many references must I have for Assignment 1? How many marks do I get for presentation/referencing?* precisely because they are smart enough to have figured out that the audit regimes of higher education have been reduced to assessing that which can be objectively measured. Auditors must grade accountably and grades are what the fees are for. In this way, the cultivation of mind is reduced to the capacity to conform. The student as customer is being well-served. The inquiring student pursuing an education is being ripped off. But surely, one might ask, higher education cannot simply indulge the whimsies of individuals! It must be relevant.

Relevance: ‘Just do it’

Education is critique. The aim of education is to develop the ability to discern the important and consequential question. It is a continuous process, the persistent pursuit of meaning and clarity. This is exactly what makes it so dangerous to established politicians and so valuable to a democracy. This stance of questioning implies a kind of external view, that one puts oneself at a distance to an issue in order to question it clearly. One surrenders having a stake in the outcome of the inquiry in the interest of dispassionate truth. In a sense, one withdraws, disconnects, in order to connect with a higher interest. One seeks to hold a kind of ‘super-stakeholder’ perspective. Like Perseus with his burnished bronze shield, one turns one’s back on the issue in order to ‘reflect’ on it and deal with it and not be consumed by it.

Wisdom is connected to mindfulness, an ability to have a quiet mind, a mind that can observe without being entrapped by reaction, a mind that can work between the spaces of pro-active and re-active. This kind of mind is usually developed through quietness, often through practices such as meditation. It need not be connected with any religious value, although historically in the West it has been. A state of mindfulness is gained by withdrawing, by having a time and place that is outside the daily work, the quotidian, the busyness of everyday life and work. That is at the individual level. I suggest that this could work at the institutional level. One of the important attributes of the University is that it is one of those social institutions we have which can provide, at a social level, the time and space in an individual’s life where they can step back from the pond they are in to see the large landscape they occupy and in which the pond exists. Too often we think the pond we are in is the world. Universities can do for the society mindfulness training or meditation can do for the individual. There have been many traditional ways societies do this, which, in our highly connected, cross-cultural, 24/7 world, we no longer practice. Feast days, common holidays, seasonal festivals, were all ways of temporarily standing outside the demands of everyday life. Indeed, the Sabbath, the idea of a seventh day of rest that emerges from the Judeo-Christian tradition resonates with the advice from many other sources about the need for regular rest. High performance sports stars know about the need to have rest time, to step outside the demands of the regular training schedule. Rest is built into the training schedule. In other words, periods of not training, of disconnecting, are intrinsic to high performance outcomes.

The demand for universities to be ‘relevant’, that is, preoccupied with immediate current affairs and the current constructions of problems emerges from vested interests. Individuals or groups or institutions that step back from the immediate to take another view and ask fundamental questions threaten the status quo. They may reframe the issue, refuse to play the game and point out that the Emperor is naked. This is why Governments detain academics and journalists; precisely because they are ‘outsiders’. What journalists do in a daily timeframe academics do in the longer term.

Fuck nuance, fuck neoliberalism

Universities have always been contentious. One hopes that The Visitations of Oxford and Cambridge conducted in the 17th Century could not possibly take place today. And wasn’t it a wonderful thing for nepotistic medieval universities to be brought to heel by Dukes demanding performance reports. And no doubt the meritocracy achieved through bureaucracy by the German research university was better than having universities used for the transmission of privilege. And of course, universities after WWII were indeed forces for democracy and today they are complex hybrid beasts. So of course, much of the argument in this essay must be tempered with caveats and the recognition of subtlety and specific conditions. Fuck that. There are ways in which academics are their own worst enemies. Kieran Healey (2016) points out how the demand for nuance and balance may be a proxy for arrogance and insecurity. Academics can easily get implicated in the neo-liberal enterprise by insisting on considered thoughtful argumentation. Sometimes this can be self-defeating and resistance means wholesale and outright rejection (Springer, 2016). (Note my use here of academic convention.) In the face of the degrading and destructive onslaught of neoliberal policies, and in recognition of the huge power behind them, it is time to favour fierce and strident vehemence over considered, qualified debate.

Is it time to do away with government higher education policy altogether, and have a higher education sector that operates analogous to the judiciary? Most designs for democracy have a judiciary independent of the political process. Higher education run on the same lines might not only maintain, but enhance democratic process. It is time to take higher education out of the realm of government policy.

When are we going to act on the evidence that performance pressure on both academics and students is not conducive to education? The demand for adequate performance is not a threat *per se.* But performance defined in terms of measurable monetized results, does not relate to education. It is time to take education out of the capitalist economic framework and reframe it in terms of a gift economy.

Higher education close up: Read the small print

The tension in education for maintaining and challenging the status quo has an interesting current form. Recent attempts to explain the rise of American authoritarianism invoke the work of Stanley Feldman, who posited authoritarianism as a personality profile rather than just a political preference. Feldman tested preferences for independence or respect for elders, obedience or self-reliance, considerateness or good behaviour, and curiosity or good manners. Many graduate profiles specify capabilities that are clearly anti-authoritarian. At the same time governments demand audit regimes that in practice ensure higher education conforms to a narrow capitalist instrumentalism. Insofar as we could succeed in producing graduates who were independent, self-reliant, considerate and curious we would be producing a kind of insurance policy against authoritarianism. Does the converse hold? Might it be that enforcing an elaborate audit regime in higher education supports the development of an authoritarian state?

In 1960 Eisenhower warned his countrymen “against unwarranted influence whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist”. He went on to warn of the influence of the complex on universities, where “a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity”. We should be wary of the caricature of fascism, of form obscuring substance. Military uniforms, jackboots and demagoguery are easily discarded in favour of suits, fashionable footware and discreet lobbying. Policies are designed long before they are played out in the minutiae of everyday practice such as employability profiles, transferable skills, deliverables, pursuit of relevance, equivalence policies, learning outcomes, assessments that allocate marks for boxes, and so on. In the face of rising authoritarianism, the student who wants to know “What are my fees for?” should be told the truth. And those of us in higher education should, to paraphrase Greg Palast, should continue to insist on something more socially valuable than the best democracy money can buy.

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