

Thematic Reflections on Higher Education

Postmodernism *versus* Professionalism in Higher Education

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A global paradigm shift is taking place at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, which is resulting in massive changes in the frames of reference about the ways of life, work, and society and how they are viewed and organized. This shift is essentially a sweeping set of worldwide changes in the public domain which challenges the prevailing orthodoxies of Western society; specifically, questioning the nature of truth and knowledge. These changes have been described by the use of such terms as post-industrialism, post-liberalism, and postmodernity. This changing social world is characterized by economic flexibility, technological complexity, cultural and religious diversity, moral and scientific uncertainty, and national insecurity. The “postmodern” condition, therefore, has implications for the nature and professionalism of teaching. The work of teachers is already changing, owing to the dramatic changes in the world in which they work. This article attempts to identify the impact of postmodernism on the concept and practice of teaching, especially in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As the world moves into the Twenty-First Century, a massive change, along the lines of a global paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970), is occurring. It is affecting frames of reference about the ways of life, work, and society, and how they are viewed and organized (Drucker, 1989; Cooke, 1990; Gergen, 1992; Kennedy, 1993). This shift is essentially a sweeping set of worldwide changes in the public domain brought about by challenges (specifically, questioning the nature of truth and knowledge) to the prevailing orthodoxies of Western society. Hargreaves (1994, p. 48) indicates the agreement of most writers on the transition of society that “at the heart of the transition is the globalization of economic activity, political relations, information, communications, and technology. This transition has major implications for the profession of teaching.”

Teaching is a changing profession. The public wants teachers to change; administrators are endlessly exhorting teachers to change; and the government is constantly imposing changes on teachers. The work of teachers is already changing owing to the dramatic changes in the world in which they work. These changes have been described in terms like post-industrialism, post-liberalism, and postmodernity. This changing social world is characterized by economic flexibility, technological complexity, cultural and religious diversity, moral and scientific uncertainty, and national insecurity. This article attempts to identify the impact of postmodernism on the concept and practice of teaching, especially at the level of higher education.

MODERN TO POSTMODERN AND PERHAPS BEYOND?

There is no firm ground under the feet of society. Nothing any longer is steadfast. ... Hence the chaos seen in certain democracies, their constant flux and instability. There we get an existence subject to sudden squalls, disjointed, halting, and disjuncting (Emile Durkheim).

The above quotation from Durkheim signifies that the transition from traditional to modern society was experienced as a crisis. This crisis necessitated new perspectives and solutions to the perceived social and political problems. Theoretical discourses would therefore appear to be responses to historical crises, disturbing economic and technological developments, and social and intellectual upheavals produced by the disintegration of previously stable or familiar modes of thinking and living (Best and Kellner, 1991). Modernity is normally perceived as a historical period with its origins in the Enlightenment and continuing to the present day. The Enlightenment witnessed the start of a process of modernization of socio-economic and cultural change and disruption marked by "industrialization, the growth of science and technology, the modern state, the capitalist world market, urbanization, and other infrastructural elements" (Featherstone, 1991, p. 60).

During the 1960s, with its post-war celebration of the "affluent society", the rules and regulations of a rigid and oppressive modern society were questioned, leading to the socio-economic rebellion of the "swinging sixties". However, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the effects of the revolution really manifested themselves. A number of dramatic developments in media, computers and new technologies, political shifts, new cultural forms, and new experiences of space and time had their impact on global societies. These socio-economic and cultural transformations heralded a change from the previous society with the fragmentation of the "modern" modes of organization to the advent of the postmodern moment.

The postmodern critique includes the works of Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Rorty, and Schrag. The most widely regarded exposition of postmodernist philosophy is often attributed to Lyotard's, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, published in Paris in 1979, which became an instant *cause célèbre* in France. For the first time, the issues in the modernity/postmodernity stakes were crystallized. French thought is the most widely influential source of postmodern themes, and Foucault and Derrida are the most influential postmodernist philosophers. However, Wittgenstein suggested that given the weighty disagreements among the chief sages of postmodernism, namely Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, one could not be certain what views, if any, are quintessentially postmodern.

The common thread appears to be the rejection, by these thinkers, of the idea that desirable social change is conceptualized and pursued as social progress in the modern sense; that is, that "modern progress" is the idea that forms of human knowledge, social organization, and creative expression are progressively improved over time, either gradually or through successive waves of intellectual revolutions. The sociological concept of the "postmodern" has been criticized as historically premature. While there have been important social, technical, and economic changes in this period when compared to those of the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the dominant mode of production has remained the same (Burger, 1985).

The actual term "postmodernism" appears in a varied range of contexts, from academic essays on organizational theory to advertisements in the *New York Times*. The *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* suggests that the broad capacity of the term "postmodernism" testifies to the scope of the cultural changes it attempts to encompass. Postmodernism is sometimes referred to as late modernity. Usher *et al.* (1997) believe that it is associated with

such contemporary trends as the growth of service-sector employment, post-industrial social structures, and post-Fordist configurations of production.

However, as postmodern debate goes on, so must educational establishments continue to educate and teachers to teach, but the ramifications of the various debates have important consequences for education and teaching in the future.

POSTMODERNISM AND EDUCATION

Postmodernism is not simply a body of thought, a way of theorizing, but also a way of practicing. "Educational practice has many of the features that could properly be called postmodern even though educational practitioners might be reluctant to recognize this" (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 1). There are problems, however, with attempting to relate postmodernism to education. McEwen (1999) argues that the postmodern discourse is one of liberating education from the vestiges of a Nineteenth-Century mass disciplinarian ethos and from the reproduction of class and cultural identities. Such liberation would lead to greater community control that would benefit from differentiation and increased flexibility. However, he reflects carefully on the downside, which would mean that the disadvantaged would be the least able to compete in the market and that some schools would find themselves at the bottom end of the market with pupils for whom there is no place to go.

Hargreaves (1994) argues that education should reflect the effects upon it of postmodern economies, which are distinguished by a vast range of more flexible work technologies and their subsequent impacts on the processes of labour. This increased flexibility is supposed to create more meaningful and holistic work for the individual. A major consequence of these more flexible economies is the impact on the teaching of the necessary knowledge and skills. More flexible patterns of work and structures for the teaching profession will be required as a result. One effect has been reflected in the global imposition of centralized control of curriculum and assessment requirements.

Unfortunately, the desire for economic flexibility has meant that national and cultural identity has suffered, a situation that has had a profound impact on knowledge and belief systems and their mastery. The impact on teaching and professionalism has been particularly heavy.

TEACHING, PROFESSIONALISM, AND PROLETARIANIZATION

In considering the destinations towards which change has been carrying society, Toffler (1983) states that change is the only constant. He argues that humanity was facing a quantum leap forward that would involve it in the most profound upheaval and social restructuring of all time. Fullan (1993) reflects the work of Kuhn (1970) when he suggests that this quantum leap will be a "paradigm breakthrough" in management, thinking, and response to change. According to Rosenau (1992, p. 8), it is becoming increasingly clear that society is in the midst of another age of discontinuity that offers "indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplicity".

Pascale (1990) maintains that within education, productive change roams somewhere between over-control and chaos. The velocity and implications of educational reform have been considered by many writers (Fullan, 1991, 1993; Bennett *et al.*, 1992; Whitaker, 1993; Stoll and Fink, 1996; Hughes, 1996) who have all suggested that, over the past number of years, the education system has been experiencing a radical and unprecedented programme of reform.

According to Handy (1984, p. 7), "Schools are organizations of professionals who, in the manner of professionals like to manage themselves." Professionalism was observed by Grace (1994, pp. 18–19) as the dominant culture in schools in the 1950s and 1960s:

The discourse of modern management and bureaucracy was largely absent from schools. Headteachers were expected to relate to their colleagues within the principles and procedures of modern professionalism rather than managerialism. ... The empowerment of professional teachers and headteachers at this time empowered the culture of professionalism itself. The dominant notions of this era were that schools could be effectively organized and administered by a competent group of professionals.

The late 1980s, however, witnessed a return to the form of centralized control that existed at the turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries with a rapid build-up of central government reforms. Schools were reproached for their mediocrity and blamed for the decline in the economy. As in many other countries in the world, the British schools and other learning institutions were accused of having failed to provide education of the necessary relevance and quality, and indeed of having been insufficiently accountable for their performance. With a series of sweeping changes beginning in the mid-1980s, the government sought to modify this situation with a range of legislation which created concern not only by its enforced changes but also by the imposed speed of implementation. The belief was that public services should be managed as any other organization and be subject to market forces.

Helsby (1995) has suggested that the recurring theme in government reforms has been a movement from professionalism to proletarianization. The tendency has been for the state to attempt to manage professional workers through an ideology of professionalism, which Ozga (1992) regards as an approach intended to "deprofessionalize" and "reprofessionalize" teachers in a way more conducive to the longer term aims of government.

Hargreaves (1994, p. 6) argues that, while the reforms have potential to enhance the professionalism of teachers, in practice, they have often been characterized by the extreme "disrespect and disregard that the reformers have shown for teachers themselves". The intensified exposure has created something of a dilemma for teachers—should they participate in a market culture for the benefit of their schools and their pupils or should they remain loyal to their own personal and professional values at the risk of disadvantage for their schools? This perspective is developed by Harris (1993), and the view taken is that recent reforms are simply part of a deprofessionalization process and in no way seek to enhance the professionalism of teachers. Lawn and Ozga (1986) have suggested that the concept of professionalism has been used not only to support the vocational strategy of organized teachers but also by the state to actually control them.

This perceived result can be traced back to Lyotard's belief (1984) that behind modern scientific knowledge is what he calls a metanarrative, metadiscourse, or grand narrative, which seeks to legitimize science as a form of knowledge privileged over other forms of knowledge. In particular, there is the metanarrative of emancipation, whereby the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge is legitimized on the grounds that it results in progress towards the emancipation of mankind. Through this metanarrative, the state is able, legitimately, to take control of the institutions of education to ensure that people are directed to progress and their subsequent emancipation. As Usher and Edwards (1994) state, "The legitimacy of modern scientific knowledge is therefore posited on and reproduced as a specific set of relationships between 'the state', the people, and the nation." Perhaps this

is what Day (1998, p. 53a) regards as “control masquerading as enlightenment” when he views recent government policies and their subsequent management initiatives in education.

As professionals, teachers claim a measure of autonomy in the classroom, but with the increased government intervention manifesting itself through measures such as a National Curriculum, school league tables, assessment of teaching and the National Professional Qualification for headteachers, both autonomy and professionalism are being constantly eroded. It is obvious that this postmodern society, with its new public managerialism, has major implications for all educational institutions, not the least for higher education.

THE POSTMODERN UNIVERSITY

In 1984, Lyotard considered the way in which the status of knowledge is altered as Western societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age, and cultures enter the postmodern age. He claimed that in this postmodern age, the university as we know it may be nearing its end. He attempted to demonstrate that the emancipatory metanarrative developed during the Enlightenment by the master discourse of metaphysical philosophy is epistemologically bankrupt.

Lyotard (1984) identified a second metanarrative that was embodied in the German Hegelian tradition and the policies of the Nineteenth Century Prussian state. This one was the speculative narrative whereby science was legitimized on the grounds that it contributes to the unity of all knowledge. This metanarrative emphasizes the importance of the university as an educational institution, in which academics have autonomy to pursue knowledge as they see fit, without outside interference. The founding of the University of Berlin was the embodiment of this philosophy. Lyotard considers that this model is the basis for much of the development of higher education in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

To say that, currently, the university in Western society is in a state of crisis is simply to echo the thoughts and sentiments of a generation of post-Second World War commentators. Accordingly, the word “crisis” has lost almost any conceptual purpose. In the 1980s and 1990s, under a neo-conservative ideological hegemony committed first to reducing levels of public expenditure and, later, to market principles and privatization strategies in an attack on the social-democratic principles of the welfare state, the term has resurfaced with a vengeance. The concept of crisis is linked to the financial survival of the university. It is related to the problems of funding and is really viewed as a fiscal crisis. It supersedes any idea of a crisis of legitimization or of governance.

According to Smith and Webster (1997), “The university has tended to absorb and to accumulate the changing aspirations—and perhaps also the presumptions—of successive generations and, not surprisingly, it has also come to disappoint them”. The pace and radical nature of higher education has been profoundly evidenced in the United Kingdom, the result of its relative lateness in evolving from an élite to a mass system of higher education. Educators in higher education are finding it increasingly problematic to simply take refuge in the uncertainties of the past. It would appear that the theory, purposes, and practices of higher education need reconfiguring, and new conceptual resources are required to make sense of the contemporary conjuncture and the place of higher education within it. Organizations with large numbers of professional staff tend to show intensifying indications of tension between the conflicting demands of professionalism and the hierarchy (Bush, 1995).

In 1987, Robert Jackson, the then parliamentary under-secretary of state, regarded universities as cartels of producer interests. He suggested that the university culture, the

essence of which “lay in the power which it gave to producer interests”, should no longer be allowed to obstruct “the strategic design of Britain’s economic revival”. Kedourie (1989), however, dismisses this idea, suggesting that, “even a cursory knowledge of British University finances would show up the absurdity of all this talk of cartels and monopolies”.

Exposure to market forces and the increase in the student population, together with moves towards open access, have meant that the existing, limited resources have to be stretched even more thinly. Barnett (1994, p. 5) views higher education as “being locked into a Weberian iron cage of over-prescriptive rationality, of given ends and operationalism”.

In a two-year period, from 1992 and 1994, fourteen influential reports were published about the future of higher education. The content of these reports addressed immediate requirements for change caused by a mass higher education system (McFarlane, 1992; HEFCE, 1993), a changing student population (NIACE, 1993), and longer term requirements arising out of economic and social imperatives (NCE 1993; HMSO 1993).

TEACHING PROFESSIONALISM AND AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The combination of circumstances in which adult education is currently located is one that poses difficult questions of interpretation. For some (Giddens, 1990, 1991), the cultural, technological, and economic changes represent an intensification of the existing commodification of education. For others, such as Harvey (1991) and Lyotard (1984), these trends signify the inability of modernity to fulfill its aspirations and promises and lead the way to postmodernity. The only certainty for higher education is the lack of certainty about how to characterize the increasing complexity of contemporary times and the unprecedented uncertainty faced by all sectors of education, including universities.

The two principal functions of knowledge—research and the transmission of acquired learning—have been transformed by the leading sciences and technologies of telematics, cybernetics, informatics, and the expansion of computer languages. According to Lyotard (1984, p. 4), “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production; in both cases, the goal is exchange”. He defines postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives”, since these historically legitimated the university in the past. He openly states his mistrust of the grand narratives, which purport to justify certain practices or institutions by grounding them in a set of historical or universal principles.

In this new climate, the primary goal of universities becomes their optimal contribution to the best performance of the social system, especially in terms of their usefulness to government and industry (Readings, 1996). Derrida (1983) questions the *raison d’être* of the university and confronts a number of issues, not least of all the politics of research and teaching. He claims that the university is being bombarded by numerous external forces that are creating a double question of professions, of producing professional competencies, and of the university ensuring its own professional reproduction. Peters (1992) suggests that, in the existing climate, a variety of commentators (Beloff, 1990) have drawn attention to the fact that we may be witnessing the end of the university as an autonomous institution, as a community of scholars.

This result, if it occurs, will be the fruit of the postmodernistic phenomenon of “the new public managerialism”. Managerialism has been referred to as the private-sector “solution” to the public-sector “problem”. The managerialist view, according to Lawton (1992), is not a British phenomenon but is being implemented globally. Most notably it now pervades

public administration in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States (Pollitt, 1990; Hede, 1991; Caiden, 1994; Dixon, 1996). Uhr (1990, p. 22) defines managerialism as “the pursuit of results-oriented systems of government management through streamlined processes of decision-making, designed to allow greater autonomy but also greater responsibility for the field or programme manager”.

The intensified exposure to market forces and the increase and diversity in the student population along with moves towards open access have meant that the existing, limited resources have to be stretched even more thinly. For funding purposes, the universities have to endure assiduous pressure to give a formal and public account of themselves and to carry out more visible types of evaluation, such as numerical indicators of research, student assessment of teaching, and output by quality assessments.

The policy of government on the two main pillars of university existence—research and teaching—clearly indicates the impact of managerialism on professional autonomy. Many would believe that the model of “Economy, Efficiency, and Effectiveness” of the Audit Commission (1987) describes what the intentions of the new public management really are. They were reflected in the Treasury White Paper *Better Accounting for the Taxpayers’ Money* (1995), which proposed measures to link the costs of resources to their objectives and outputs.

Public funds for research in the United Kingdom are provided under the dual system whereby the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) contributes to the salaries of permanent academic staff, premises, and central computing costs, largely according to formulae; and the Research Councils provide for direct project costs and make a contribution to indirect project costs largely in response to competition among research proposals. This dual system is viewed by Talib and Steele (2000) as “a budget allocation compromise between autonomy and public accountability”.

The impact on professional autonomy is further intensified by the introduction of the Teaching Quality Assessment. Under the terms of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the HEFCE has a responsibility for securing the assessment of the education that it funds. This requirement is clearly stated on the HEFCE Web page: “We are legally responsible for ensuring that the quality of education is assessed in the universities and colleges we fund.” Some of the participants in the debate suggest that this statement, in itself, clearly illustrates that control is the central focus of the philosophy of the new public managerialism.

When teaching quality assessment began in 1993, the quality of educational assessment was graded into three bands: excellent, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory. By 1995, teaching quality assessment had expanded into six criteria that were regarded as collectively forming the student learning experience. These areas include:

- curriculum design, content, and organization;
- teaching, learning, and assessment;
- student progression and achievement;
- student support and guidance;
- learning resources;
- quality assurance and enhancement.

The teaching assessment results are given as a numerical score, with grades from 1 to 4 being awarded for each category and with 24 being the maximum number of points available. Currently, the criteria for assigning these grades are:

- (i) The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met, and there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.
- (ii) This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.
- (iii) This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are met.
- (iv) This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims of the subject provider are clearly met.

In evaluating teaching quality, the assessors attempt to test the quality of the student learning experience and student achievement. These are measured against the aims and objectives that the subject provider sets for the education of its students.

Such is the concern over the impact of the new managerialist policies on professional autonomy, the quality of the student learning experience, and academic quality standards that the Association of University Teachers (AUT) of the United Kingdom submitted evidence to this effect, in 2000, to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment inquiry into higher education (*AUT Bulletin*, 2000). This evidence indicates that for years members of this association have consistently expressed the view that the quality of the student experience has suffered from the underfunded expansion of higher education. As a result of the sheer pressure of student numbers there has been an element of grade inflation, but not necessarily conscious lowering of academic hurdles to avoid a significant increase in student failure rates. The evidence includes reports of lecturers being forced to use less time-consuming and less rigorous assessment techniques. There is also evidence that imposed time pressures prevent lecturers from properly monitoring the work of individual students. This situation has resulted in increased difficulty in distinguishing between original student work and that plagiarized from other sources.

Pratt (1994) has argued that the underlying political logic of imposed quality assessment schemes in higher education means that what is at stake is nothing less than the profession, as we know it. Dennis (1995) takes the matter a stage further and suggests that quality appears to be a metonym for system worship, which in itself is a deification of managerialist prerogatives and that the concern should be with an apparent movement towards a regime of a total systematic management of humans.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that postmodernism and its manifestation as new public management or managerialism are eroding the very base on which professionalism in teaching and the necessary level of autonomy are founded. McEwen (1999) has identified the proletarianization of many professions, especially teaching. This evolution has intensified the nature of work and is leading to atomization. He has stressed that the subsequent separation of teaching from management has generated increased stress that in many cases has resulted in burnout. It is very evident that education is now a private commodity rather than a public responsibility.

According to Barnett (1997, p. 143):

Professionalism is being shorn of its critical components. It is being diminished, its critical edge being reduced to problem solving in bounded professional

situations or to “reflecting” critically on one’s professional practice. ... Endorsing Friedson (1994) we can say that professionalism can be and should be reborn.

The problem is how and when?

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