

The Discourse of Success and Failure; Pedagogical Tools for Learner Engagement**Alice Sinclair (PhD Candidate), The Department of Education, Monash University, Australia****ABSTRACT**

Central to debates on the commercialization of higher education are international student/customer and questions of standards and English language competency. This paper discusses the preliminary findings, a pilot study, of a qualitative case study questioning the influence of the customer-seller paradigm on the relational identities of international students and their teacher, within the context of Australian university English language Direct Entry Programs (DEPs). In doing so it problematizes the marketing of DEPs and the selling of 'success', as a reified notion situated within neo liberal discourses of education. The study suggests that University English language centres, in an attempt to align international student expectations and to assimilate students into western academic practices, may be inadvertently inhibiting learner independence and confidence. Core to these practices are conceptualizations of international students and beliefs about: success in language learning, the influence of marketing activities and the relationship between student learning and culture.

OUTLINE

Global social changes and significant ideological shifts in education have altered basic assumptions about purposes of education. The resulting clash of cultures, between consumerism and the academy, can be evidenced by the numerous and impassioned debates on the erosion of standards as a consequence of financial imperatives in education. Emerging from these debates is the belief that students see themselves as customers and the belief that this is changing the student-teacher dynamics of the classroom in detrimental ways (Baldwin, 1994; Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Eisenberg, 1997; Morley, 2003). For many, the fee-paying student equals the international student and the customer (Devos, 2003) and this positioning ties them to debates on declining standards and student performance. The international student-customer — or rather the Asian international student — has become a signifier of the culture of enterprise and, through a process of conflation, represents many perceived ills of commercialization (Devos, 2003, Phan, 2009). Moreover, the marketing activities of universities have inadvertently created and reinforced the student-customers identity (Brennan & Bennington, 1999; Driscoll & Wicks, 1998; O'Dwyer, 2003; Svensson & Wood, 2007) within a customer-seller paradigm.

While grave concerns have been expressed about the unforeseen consequences of the commercialization of higher education on pedagogical practices and academic standards, few empirical studies support or question their validity. The marketing activities have not been explored in relation to the pedagogical context, empirical studies looking at the notion of students as consumers are minimal and none address the perspectives of international students and their teachers. In the current climate, cost cutting measures and reliance on full-fee paying international students is likely to increase and intensify debates on standards and quality.

The methodology chosen for this study is underpinned by a conceptualization of language, meaning, representation and culture as overlapping and interdependent, creating social constructs that regulate and legitimize norms, and allowing for questioning of identity within the social constructs of culture and ideology and the contradictions inherent in the dominant institutions in society (Gee, 1997, 1999; Giroux, 2000; Hall, 1996). This framework informs and guides research into how students and teachers are represented and positioned, and into how they represent and position themselves (Gee, 1997, 1999, 2011). In this way, it is a resource for enquiry into the relational identities of students and teachers and into the current challenges facing universities and their commercial entities.

The findings discussed in this paper have emerged as a theme from the pilot study of an overarching qualitative case study examining perceptions of student as consumers by students and teachers in three university English language centres (ELCs). The pilot focused on a single centre and employed three 'interconnected' and 'interpretive' techniques of data collection: document analysis (a brochure, a webpage and a student handbook), a focused group discussion and semi-structured individual interviews. The research participants, five students and one teacher, were drawn from teachers and students of an ELC direct entry pathway program (DEP), also commonly known as bridging programs. These programs allow international students who pass the internal assessment requirements of the program to articulate to the university endorsing the pathway. Multiple techniques were used to collect data allowing for complexity and contradiction and multiple perspectives and insights to become visible. Three levels of analysis were applied to form a thick and holistic description; surface analysis, membership category analysis and questions generated from Gee's (2011) tools: the identity building tool and the Big D Discourse tool.

Analysis suggests that the representation of students, in promotional documents, is as customers within a framework of success. In this framework emphasis is on 'support' and on academic study *skills*, as tools for success, while the language learning dimensions of mastering these skills are obscured. Marketers are aware that further language study and IELTS/TOEFL testing is not appealing to students who have probably failed a proficiency test a number of times. Language learning is likely to be allied to failure in the minds of many students but academic preparation is associated with success and with their goal of entering the university. Indeed, these students want to be at the university not studying English and so academic preparation and the centre's alignment with the university, conceptually and physically, are highly attractive. The relationship with the university and emphasis on the learning of academic study skills serve as capital in the persuasive marketing of the DEP and offers the promise of success at the centre and in their future studies at the university. However, this study suggests that this positioning of the student as customer within a framework of success may be a source of confusion to students, a confusion between academic success and language learning, and that it has given rise to a counter discourse of failure in ELCs.

Analysis of student handbooks and transcripts suggests that there is a perception that students have unrealistic expectations of their success, which need to be down managed. In an attempt to realign these expectations, and perhaps to restore the power balance of the student-teacher

relationship that is seen as being undermined by the student as customer identity, a Discourse of failure has emerged. This Discourse, along with the positioning of students as deficit learners and beliefs about Asian student learning styles, can be seen to have brought about pedagogical contradictions and confusion around assessment and assessment practices. Awareness of the demands, challenges and likely proficiency outcomes of English language study, within a defined and relatively short period of time, do need to be clear but centres also need to support self-actualization, a growth mindset that allows students to achieve their potential. In focusing on failure centres may be adopting practices that foster deficiency-motivated learning, a fixed-mindset, which undermines the supportive learning environment they seek to promote.

This paper contributes to empirical research exploring the unforeseen human effects of fitting education into profit-making schema. It seeks to open up a research space, into the effects of consumerism on international students and teachers in higher education and to provide insights for the ethical treatment of students in a commercial environment.

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, G. (1994). The Student as Customer: The Discourse of "Quality" in Higher Education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 16(1), 125-133.
- Brennan, L. and Bennington, L. (1999). Concepts in Conflict: Students and Customers- An Australian Perspective. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 9(2), 19-40.
- Darlaston-Jones, D. (2007). Making connections: The relationship between epistemology and research methods. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(1), 19-27.
- Devos, A. (2003). Academic Standards, Internationalisation, and the Discursive Construction of the "International Student". *Higher Education Research & Development*, 22(2), 155-166.
- Douglas, J. and Douglas, A. (2006). Evaluating Teaching Quality. *Quality in Higher Education*, 12(1), 3-13.
- Driscoll, C. and Wicks, D. (1998). The customer-driven approach in business education: A possible danger? *Journal of education for Business*, 74(1), 58-61.
- Eisenberg, A. F. (1997). Education and the Marketplace: Conflicting Arenas? Response to "A Postmodern Explanation of Student Consumerism in Higher Education". *Teaching Sociology*, 25(4), 328-332.
- Gee, J. P. (1997). Introduction. In A. a. G. Hargreaves, I. (Ed.), *Changing literacies*. OUP.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *Introduction to Discourse Analysis, An: Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P (2011). *How to do discourse analysis: a toolkit*. Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (2000) *Stealing innocence: youth, corporate power, and the politics of culture*.
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs 'identity'? . In Hall, S. and du Gay, P.(Ed.), *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage.
- Morley, L. (2003). Reconstructing Students as Customers *Quality and Power in Higher Education: Society*

for Research into Higher Education and Open University.

O'Dwyer, S. (2003). The Student Is My Customer: useful Conceptual Innovation or Category Mistake. *EA Journal*, 21(1), 52-60.

Phan, L. H. (2009). English as an international language: international student and identity formation. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 9(3), 201-214.

Svensson, G. and Wood, G. (2007). Are university students really customers? When illusion may lead to delusion for all! *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 21(1), 17.