

“The words we say will teach, if we practise what we preach: Developing a new discourse to encourage cultural changes in higher education.”

Much has been written about the variety of challenges and concerns currently facing the UK HE sector, largely brought about by the forthcoming introduction of higher tuition fees and changes in government policy regarding undergraduate student numbers. What has been termed the ‘marketisation’ of HE (Molesworth et al., 2011) has intensified the debate about student expectations and the impact upon the learning experience. This debate underpins the language used and the meanings associated with this. We read and hear about students being seen/seeing themselves as consumers, customers, citizens (Nordensvärd, 2011), products (Emery et al., 2001) and employees (Hoffmann and Kretovics, 2004). The complexity of the student identity is problematic in terms of the influence it has on the service that HEIs provide, which in itself is complex in terms of interplay between the core (education) and secondary services (resources, support, facilities, etc.).

The growing application of a business-oriented approach to HE has positive implications, including having brought about a more systematic approach to monitoring and improving quality. Indeed, “*marketisation has opened several opportunities to the HE sector to build strong relationships with the students and the community as partners in their endeavour to provide quality education*” (Ramachandran, 2010, p. 546). Furthermore, to be competitive in the swiftly changing environment, the application of *appropriate* marketing theories and techniques enables a proactive, rather than a reactive, approach to working with environmental changes.

As significant changes in the HE environment loom, the overriding concerns are that student expectations will increase disproportionately as they focus on economic return, and the educational experience itself will be diluted as staff focus on achieving high satisfaction ratings (Barnett, 2011). Being encouraged to see oneself as customer brings with it expectations of consistency and predictability of the ‘product’, and the perception that one is in a position to judge the quality of the product. The idea that students should be treated as customers has received just criticism because “*the sense that marketing, and the customer metaphor,*

marginalise and trivialise core academic principles is never far away" (Woodall et al., 2012, p. 4).

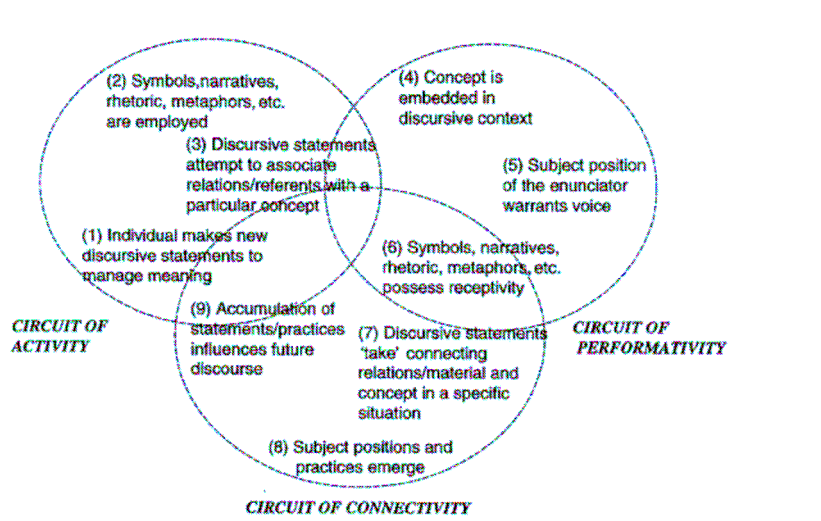
The objective of our paper is to set out the case for a change in the discourse within HEIs to steer cultural change. Discourse has effectively been used to change organisational practices (DeCock, 1998), and encourage cultural changes in organisations (Hardy et al, 2000). DeCock (1998) summarises the nature of discourse; that it is the regularised language practices in a particular community; contingent; reflects rules, procedures and perceptions and the communication of these; restricts, limits and arranges what can/cannot be said about particular phenomena; and empowers/disempowers agents to speak on issues. By intervening and pro-actively changing the discourse, cultural change can be brought about.

The desired cultural change is one where staff and students are able to differentiate between secondary services, where 'satisfaction' is the minimum that a customer/service user should expect, and the academic and personal learning experience, i.e. the core service, that is unpredictable and inconsistent, and can be uncomfortable and/or uncertain for the learner. While we strive to challenge our students to bring about engagement, collaboration, independence, curiosity, self-awareness, a constant questioning, and critical dialogue, satisfaction cannot be the goal itself - only a welcome bi-product. The core and secondary service levels are not neatly separable. It is, therefore, necessary to explore the areas where these overlap (e.g. the support provided for technology, and its use in extending the learning experience beyond the classroom), and what can usually be identified as directly associated with the learning experience (e.g. classroom lectures and tutorials). Cultural change is needed to move student perceptions of their role to those that enable co-creation of the learning experience, where their responsibility for the richness and success of their learning is recognised, articulated, explored and acted upon.

Whilst it is not within the remit of this paper to enter into a philosophical debate about discourse, there are two main areas of discourse that we will focus on. Deutscher (2010) explores the relationship between culture, language and thought. Although focusing on geographical culture and language, the principle of the interrelationship between these three can be translated into the HE environment.

The culture that forms and reflects the attitudes and behaviours of students and staff, the language they use with each other, and the impact this has on the way all parties think is entirely relevant to the challenges of HE today. This is reflected in the ‘circuit of activity’ presented in Hardy et al.’s (2000) model (Figure 1), where strategic discourse is developed within an organisation through the introduction of new discursive statement, use of symbols, and narrative metaphors aimed at evoking concepts to create particular objects. Hardy et al. (2000, p1228) state “*it is possible for individuals to engage in discursive activity and to access different discourses to generate new meanings that help – or hinder – the enactment of particular strategies.*”

Figure 1



Source: Hardy et al., 2000, p. 1235

Whilst we must acknowledge that the discourse fostered by external sources is not in the control of HEIs, they can begin to influence external bodies by using discourse as a strategic tool. It is the strategic potential of discourse in its application to the HE sector in general, and to the positioning of individual HEIs that provides the second thread to our exploration.

Aston Business School is embarking upon a programme of activities focused upon changing the discourse of students and staff, differentiating between core and secondary services yet acknowledging their interdependence, and with the aim of bringing about the desired culture change. To change the discourse, we must first

identify and log the nature of the current discourse, which will be done through auditing current communications from university level through to individual modules and staff-student interactions. Emphasis will be placed on the language used; in the student charter, in university communications, during induction, classroom and module materials, etc. We will also study student expectations when they arrive at university, which will provide the basis for further communications and interventions centred upon the notion of students as developing professionals, using Hardy et al.'s (2000) model as a framework. The interventions will embrace all stakeholders, and extend from university level communications to one-to-one interactions between staff and students. The impact of such interventions will be monitored, and the short-term impact results will be available at the end of term one.

Reference list

- Barnett, R. (2011) "The Marketised University: Defending the Indefensible". in The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer, Ed. Molesworth et al. Routledge, Oxon.
- DeCock, C. (1998) "Organisational change and discourse: Hegemony, resistance and reconstitution" Management **1**(1); 1-22
- Deutscher, G. (2010) Through the Language Glass. Why the world looks different in other languages. Arrow Books, London
- Emery, C. Kramer, T. and Tian, R. (2001) "Customers vs. products: Adopting an effective approach to business students" Quality Assurance in Education **9**(2); 110-115
- Gibbs, P. (2011) "Finding quality in 'being good enough' conversations", Quality in Higher Education **17**(2); 139-150
- Hardy, C. Palmer, I. and Phillips, N. (2000) "Discourse as a strategic resource" Human Relations **53**(9); 1227-1248
- Hoffman, K.D. and Kretovics, M.A. (2004) "Students as partial employees: A metaphor for the student-institutions interaction" Innovative Higher Education **29**(2); 103-120
- Molesworth, M., Scullion, and Nixon, E. (2011) The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer, Routledge, Oxon.
- Nordensvärd, J. (2011) "The consumer metaphor versus the citizen metaphor: different sets of roles for students" in The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer, Ed. Molesworth et al. Routledge, Oxon.
- Ramachandran, N.T. (2010) "Marketing framework in higher education: Addressing aspirations of students beyond conventional tenets of selling products" International Journal of Educational Management **24**(6); 544-556
- Woodall, T. Hiller, A. and Resnick, S. (2012) "Making sense of higher education: students as consumers and the value of the university experience" Studies in Higher Education 1-12