

## **Problematizing conceptions of students and learning: how academics respond to neoliberal discourse and practices (0147)**

**Fanghanel Joelle**<sup>1</sup>, *<sup>1</sup>Thames Valley University, London, United Kingdom*

In a recent foreword to two short articles on values in higher education written by the UK student union (Streeting and Wise, 2009), and academics leading a university centre for undergraduate research (Taylor and Wilding, 2009), the Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency wrote:

Many terms and phrases are used to describe the relationship between universities and students, such as 'consumers', 'active participants', 'co-producers', 'partners', 'community of learning' and 'apprentices'; all are useful, but each has limitations and particular connotations.

In reality, the discourse of marketization - or macdonaldization (Ritzer, 1996) – dominates; and the student as 'consumer' is a powerful paradigm in today's universities. I examine this and other conceptions of students and of learning through the lens of 'educational ideologies', i.e. the ideological inflection given to act of teaching in higher education and the relation it implies between student and academics, and teaching and learning. In particular I identify in the conceptions described the relation to *production* ideologies (an economic function for higher education), *reproduction* ideologies (a mission for higher education to maintain its intellectual edge, advance knowledge and initiate into a discipline), and *transformation* ideologies (a relation to the wider world and an onus on educating for change). The focus of this paper is therefore quite unlike studies that have examined the relation between learners and academics through 'conceptions of learning' where learning is studied as an unproblematized concept (i.e. an object uncontaminated by political, social and economic constraints). In contrast, this paper perceives of the relation to students and academics and learning and conceptions as mediated through policies, discourses, and the context of practice.

I show that the discourse of policy represents very much the ideology of production. The emphasis to the economy so ubiquitous as to become totally unproblematized – with no horizon of any counterpoise to this paradigm. I show that in response to this conception of the *student as consumer*, academics position themselves either to contest or to accommodate. I then focus on four other conceptions. In a consumer-related conception, the student is conceived of as '*deficient*' (instrumentalist, lazy, lacking in motivation or

intelligence, only there for the credits). This of course conceals issues of inequalities in terms of access to higher education and models of education that perpetuate those inequalities, and it has a strong hold on the way academics work with and related to students .

I then explore conceptions of the student as '*being in becoming*'. This conception pertains to ideologies of reproduction – the student as future exponent of the subject taught; as a being in the making; as an epistemic entity in the making; or as in the process of learning of codes of conducts and values for the future. Views of the student as '*critical agent*' move the paradigm towards transformation ideologies, and includes the development of critical skills (Barnett, 1997), global citizenship attributes (Andreotti, 2006;Apple, 2005;Bourn, 2006 ) or capabilities development to enable students to transform themselves and the societies in which they live (Walker, 2006). Finally I identified conceptions of the student as '*recipient of the desire to teach*'. The pleasure and satisfaction gained from interacting with students accounts for a large part for the fact that the academic career is perceived as a desirable. Desire is a significant driver in accounting for academics' engagement in teaching, regardless of their ultimate ideological aim. I conclude by suggesting that these conceptions of students occupy uneven territories, as 'consumer' and 'deficiency' models pervade the system. I suggest however that the minority conception models explored here might generate new avenues to re-imagine higher education.

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