

### **Who knows best? Achieving informed and empowering teaching and research using the ‘student as producer’: A case study. (0050)**

Changing student experiences of higher education and evolving identities of students

Whilst there is not, and probably never has been, a consensus about the nature or purpose of university, it is clear that the core activities of university are teaching and research (Neary and Winn 2009). In many respects this ambiguity about the nature and purpose of university is an advantage which has allowed creativity in research and teaching. However this lack of clarity also potentially leaves universities vulnerable to the political whims of the government of the day. The strength of universities is also undermined by the often imposed boundary between the core activities of research and teaching which according to Brew (2006) creates an apartheid between student and teacher (cited in *ibid*). Whilst there are some very good practices relating to research informed teaching in many universities, it is also true that in many instances, research and teaching tend to be separate entities within the university. Brew therefore argues that rethinking this relationship could provide the space to ask fundamental questions about the purpose of higher education (cited in *ibid*) and Boyer (1990) maintains that teaching should be recognised as an important and fundamental part of academic life (cited in Neary 2010 p2). In the face of wide ranging cuts in government funding to higher education, the increase in tuition fees and the ever increasing evaluation of university ‘quality’ using clumsy quantitative measures, universities are being challenged on a number of levels not least being their ability to get their graduates into well paid ‘graduate level’ jobs. This commodification of higher education sees students as paying customers and consumers of university services, and academic staff under pressure to respond to their *perceived* requirements. Various measures such as ‘Employability statements’ which ‘summarise what universities and colleges offer students to help them become job-ready in the widest sense and support their transition into the world of work’ (Willets 2010) and the ‘graduateness’ of the jobs that their alumni attain six months after graduation (which is to include salary in future), are used in part to evaluate the *competence* of universities in the form of league tables. In the light of this political agenda, Newman (2009) has argued that universities not only have to explain how they can *educate* students in workplace skills, but also how they can improve the career *opportunities* of graduates. Evans (2004) has identified that the current situation has been caused by universities having ‘allowed themselves to be redesigned according to the logic of market economics’ in recent years (cited in Neary and Winn 2009 p192).

Whilst the notion of student as consumer may imply that students are empowered in their choices of and experience at university, they invariably are influenced by prevailing political utterances, and the consequent measures about what type of knowledge is seen to be ‘valuable’, what constitutes a ‘good degree’ subject or what makes a ‘top university’. Much of this is defined quantitatively rather than qualitatively. In some ways this could be seen to create a certain amount of dependency as it makes them both engage with and evaluate their university education in relation to the prevailing political ‘standards’. Students are encouraged to judge quality in terms of the learning environment and in evaluating their own achievements in blunt quantitative ways reflecting on measures of contact time, assessment marks and the amount of information imparted to them in lectures, rather than in a more abstract concept of personal development. The student as consumer is therefore encouraged to expect a tangible product for their money, from the teacher - student relationship, which ultimately creates a dependent student who according to Benjamin (1996 cited in Neary 2010) is the ‘object’ of learning and who is consequently isolated from the production of learning. The student as producer however challenges the teacher – student relationship by re-thinking

the relationship between research and teaching (Neary and Winn 2009). Taking the ethos from the Boyer Commission (1999) which calls for a commitment from universities to provide 'opportunities to learn through enquiry rather than the simple transmission of knowledge' (cited in *ibid* p195), the student as producer aims to make students 'part of the academic project of the university [collaborating] with academics in the production of knowledge and meaning' (Student as Producer home page Accessed 2011). By this, students become the subject rather than the object of the teaching and learning process (Benjamin 1996 *op cit*).

In the light of this context, this paper reflects on data from employers, students, alumni, school students and their parents, to discuss pertinent issues relating to their views on the 'value' of the university experience and its relation to teaching, learning and employability. It highlights the expectations about university by these groups and relates these to the political context of the 'student as consumer'. The paper will then consider the value of applying the notion of 'student as producer' in a practical research and teaching environment. Using reflections about the methodology and data from two CSAP funded projects, which have involved students and staff working together to evaluate the learning ethos, content and delivery of an undergraduate criminology employability module, discussions will consider the benefits and potential difficulties of this approach for both students and teachers. By applying this framework to a practical research and teaching situation, exploration can be made as to the validity, practicality and value of turning student 'readers and spectators, into collaborators' (Benjamin 1983 *op cit*). Conclusions will discuss how the application of 'student as producer' in practice, can empower both students and academic staff to counter some of the problematic consequences of the consumerisation of higher education.

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