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**From Learner to Customer: the likely impact of a shift in pedagogic authority on learning in Higher Education in England consequent upon the declared intentions of the Browne Review. (0087)**

The Browne Report on funding for Higher Education in England has presented English Universities with a major educational challenge. There is potential for the much vaunted 'student as customer' model to become the dominant meme over 'student as learner'. The paper draws on insights generated by Bourdieu on Pedagogic Authority to demonstrate the manner by which 'student as consumer' necessarily enters into a contradiction with the model of 'student as learner'. The paper argues that retention of the learner/teacher relationship at the heart of the academy may require an explicit statement of purpose and that such a statement may have unintended consequences.

This paper reflects upon the of a development programme for undergraduates (Graduate Development Programme (GDP)) at the University of the West of England. In 2007 the University initiated a University-wide programme to support students in achieving higher levels of employability. GDP is a process-based approach to personal development and employability, designed to develop students' capabilities and enhance the student experience. It is neither a compulsory programme nor is it formally assessed in any way that affects the student's degree. GDP rests upon collaboration and a meeting of minds between tutor and student. In its most recent full year of operation over 5,000 students completed at least one level of the three year programme.

The Programme requires student to participate in facilitated sessions and to reflect upon their own processes, practices and experiences as learners. The introduction of the rhetoric of the 'student as customer' therefore adds a new dimension to the discussion and interaction with those students who see the role of the lecturer as a provider of a service. The pressure to change the nature of Higher Education to make it meet with a very particular version of vocationalism and employability is intrinsic to the purposes of the Browne Report; expressed clearly in the document and during its launch.

As the report's authors put it; "Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education."  
(Executive Summary)

The process by which this is to be achieved is via an emphasis on the value of education. As Lord Browne quoted in the initial press release stated;

"We must not flinch from putting a value on education. Once we do this - and make that value portable - we will allow generations of students to reshape their higher education experience. Their choices will build a vibrant, well-funded and tailored university sector.

In effect the students are expressly requested to enter into a customer relationship with the supplier of Higher Education.

The position of the student as consumer is by necessity an ideological one, in that there is little opportunity to participate in a value exchange on the basis of learning. Put simply the changes in personality, performance and capability of a student come about primarily as a result of their participation in the process of learning. There is an exchange that takes place in the purchase of an opportunity to learn but the student has still to participate. In contrast the expression of a monetary value in Higher Education, both in payment and in outcome is explicit in the Browne Report

Much of the literature on learning and teaching is silent on the issue of the interaction with student as purchaser. This is not only the case in the UK but also in the US. (The work of Terenzini and Pascarella and Tinto amongst others has largely ignored this pressure in HE)

The response of academics to the proposition that learning can be bought and sold is a strong one but not necessarily an obvious one. After all the exchange and commodification of knowledge is a deep rooted practice in capitalist culture. If it were not what would be the purposes of licences, copyright and trademarks? In its essence the purchase of labour power in other than the most basic human labour also demands the appropriation of the knowledge and skill of the worker, up to and including very high levels of qualification and ability (e.g. University professors). So what is that drives the antipathy of lecturers to the intrusion of commercial interactions into the University, after all they are very proximate in every location but the classroom itself? It would appear that we can find an explanation in Bourdieu's description of pedagogic authority.

Bourdieu says in *Reproduction* '... we examined the social construction of the multilevel social relation of classroom understanding in and through misunderstanding to reveal the process whereby students and teachers come to agree, by a sort of tacit transaction tacitly guided by the concern to minimise costs and risks in a situation neither controls fully, on a minimal working definition of the situation of communication' (Bourdieu ix)

By undermining the pedagogic authority of the institutions the proposals in the Browne Review undermine pedagogic authority and in turn undermine pedagogic agency. In other words the call on students to act as customers in the market place is likely to damage the quality of precisely the commodity they desire to purchase. By its nature the purchase of learning undermines learning because pedagogic agency depends upon pedagogic authority, i.e. once the learner is in the hands of the teacher the teacher is all powerful in judgment at least

In order to create a good learning experience it is essential that pedagogic agency and pedagogic authority remain intact. If academic judgment is not final then there is no pedagogic authority.

So what happens if the student is informed that, no matter what he pays, the academic's judgment is final? That despite the payment of a fee, the future encumbrance of debt, and the rights of the consumer the result will not necessarily be the conferment of credentials? At its core learning depends, as Bourdieu puts it, upon a shared misunderstanding, a tacit agreement that what is imbued with authority is actually a common endeavor. The agreed concealment of power is essential; ironically Browne threatens to bring the trick into the open.

### **Bibliography**

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