

‘Student as Producer’ an idealised response to the marketisation of Higher Education: A critique based on accounts of ‘student identity and practice’

Scullion Richard, *Bournemouth University, UK*

Introduction

This paper attempts to generate academic and thus student reflection about a contemporary theme in the education literature: that of student as Producer (SAP). Such a notion appears to readily aligns itself with the discourse of ‘enhancing student engagement’ (Government White Paper 2011) a core feature and occupation of HE institutions operating within the framework of student fees. It is borne out of reflections on my own and other colleagues’ efforts to embed SAP within the curriculum. Some of these were part of the curriculum, others extra curricula, where we have at times consciously, at other times inadvertently, created a learning context where aspects of SAP have taken place. These course work, the development of a website called ‘student Showcase’ and work undertaken by some students within our commercial arm ‘Creative Enterprise Bureau’.

The paper offers a brief review of literature in this area drawing on existing theories of identity (Cherrier 2006) and Praxis (Warde 2005) to help unpack some of the pertinent challenges in generating and embedding ‘student as Producer’ in meaningful ways to both tutors and students. I also introduce some of the insights generated from phenomenological research carried out amongst students to help understand their approaches to scholarship (see Molesworth et al 2009, 2011) but that also speak directly to a contestation of SAP. The paper finishes by combining reflections on practice, conceptual problematizing of SAP and insights from primary research to offer a purposeful disruptive view of us as ‘practitioners of pedagogy’.

Problematizing ‘Student as Producer’

SAP calls for a ‘redesign of the organising principle through which knowledge is currently being produced (Neary and Winn 2009). Our experiences suggest attempts at SAP are often isolated events not institutionally embedded, furthermore, that such efforts appear in conflict with increased marketization of the HE sector (Molesworth and Scullion 2005). It is claimed that a major outcome of SAP is that the educator is ‘no longer a delivery vehicle’ (Neary and Winn 2009), if so it means the student can no longer be a receptacle waiting for others to give them the learning, the student must willingly take on this role. Again, our own experiences suggest potential and existing students, plus those that help frame what being a student is (parents, school teachers, careers advisors, HE managers, employees) are often at odds with this guiding principle. Thus, whilst SAP conceives of students being ‘creators of social wealth’ (Neary and Winn 2009), we note that various forms of capital wealth remain culturally dominant through, for example, aspiration being directed at getting a ‘good job’ and enhancing ‘career prospects’. SAP emphasises the role of student as collaborators in both the production of knowledge and the meaning afforded to this new

knowledge. Conceptually this is attractive but it has significant implications for the notion of expertise (Hendry and Dean 2002). Unless we change the basis on which we judge the value of new knowledge, much of the veracity of what is produced by students remains highly contestable. Indeed we note that the students themselves often place little credence on the value of their own work. We need to consider the quality of the outputs as well as the quality of the process and experience of those involved in SAP practices.

Previous work on both student as consumer (Molesworth et al 2009) and on student choice (Nixon et al 2010) form the conceptual base for our lens of 'student identity' to critique student as produce SAP. Student identity has been characterised in our previous work as risk averse, conservative, comfortable to play the contemporary role of student as passive, hedonistic, individualist, career oriented and extrinsically motivated. Linking these dominant identity discourses to practice theory (Warde 2005) a series of praxis are apparent. Dependent, resistant to transformation, assessment driven, semi engaged learning, distant from, often 'othering' the discipline they are studying, at times anti scholarly. This focus on contemporary student identities and resultant student practices informs our problematizing of SAP.

Insights from primary research

Brevity means I offer glimpses of the findings and insights from a series of long interviews carried out with existing students over a three-year period. In essence, along with colleagues, I am arguing that the 'raw material' in the form of our new undergraduate student intake demonstrates powerful characteristics that are contradictory to many of the tenants of SAP. This is so because the pursuit (or tacit acceptance of) 'student as consumer' (and its many manifestations in terms of HE being all about the 'student experience') tends to encourage conservative attitudes towards learning. As Ferudi argues when talking about the assumptions held dear in the current HE context (2010 p8) 'Students know how they want to be taught and have ideas about how techniques can be improved'... Aside from a disturbing tendency to equate academic teaching with a technique, the assimilation of the idea that the customer 'knows how they want to be taught' reduces academics to a service provider'. Here's an undergraduate student reflecting on his apprehension of going into final year:

And then they say, well it's you are taking responsibility for your own learning but... that's fine...but it's just...I guess some think that you are here just to learn but you aren't, you aren't here just to learn, you're here to get a degree, because you're here to get a job at a later point in life. It's not all about learning, it isn't! I mean you would think so to go into a learning institution you know...but it's not! It's partly learning, but mostly to get a job and to get good grades and then get a job. That's what it is.

At times the students recounting of the meanings they are attributing to their HE experiences also reveal depths of instrumentalism, as with two separate individuals here:

I never went to see a lecturer or seminar teacher about which assignments I did. I normally...I often knew in my own mind what I would be good at, or better at, or less worse at...I sometimes worry that if I'd have gone and seen them perhaps they would've suggested I do one that I'm not very good at just for the sake of learning it... whereas I'm a bit of a chicken when it comes to that, I'd rather just do something I know I can get a 2:1 in without sort of having to really work as hard as perhaps I should do, which is probably my problem really.....Like in the exam there was a question about looking through Noam Chomsky's books about public opinion and propaganda and stuff, and there was another one about television licence and I thought 'I'll do that...sounds easier'.

And:

Like there has been a situation, I remember one essay last year where I just decided, because there was so much other stuff going on that I was so much more interested in, I just thought that...so I calculated alright 'This essay is about 2% of my degree, my final degree, I'm not going to put that much work into it. I'm going to focus on the production work, which is what I enjoy doing, which is what I really am good at, and then I'm going to let this essay sort of slide.

Discussion

Students entering universities as 'established and experienced consumers' serves to narrow rather than broaden students' learning experiences and therefore identity. Such students seek certainty and expended effort to avoid the ambiguity caused by challenging choices or the discomfort of transformational learning. They confirm and build on their existing sense of self as a member of a consumerist culture they have already chosen – they largely see opportunity as a way to confirm themselves into a perceived job role rather than to experiment, discover different identities or broaden their capacities whilst at university.

Thus students, acting as consumers, are a conceptually poor fit with 'student as Producer'. They largely expect the opportunity to be able to tailor their degree course, purchase assistance with their desired identity and gain entry to their vision of a job. Other potential areas of tension between contemporary student identity and SAB can be found in relation to 'identity work' that *reduces the chance* of them becoming autonomous, critical thinking individuals.

However, it would be inaccurate to envisage them possessing a fixed and finalised identity by the time they start their studies, thus the context co-created by their tutors and peers has

the potential to be used for identity work. Consequently whilst critiquing notions of 'Student as Producer', it remains vital to consider how it might serve as a vehicle to assist students in challenging how they have come to acquire and sustain their identity, so that the potential for HE experiences transformative role remains.

Summary

The purpose of presenting this paper is to introduce the intellectual base of my critique of SAP. Offer, by way of our reflections on a range of SAP like learning experiences we have been involved in, consider the barriers to realising the richness that SAP conceptually claims. It asks participants to share thoughts and experiences of student identity to capture 'identikit' portraits, using these as the basis for discussion about what elements of these 'student portraits' create obstacles for successful SAP and which offer fertile entry points for successful SAP. In so doing I aim to have generated a reflective practice mode through challenging us all to reflect as 'practitioners of pedagogy' about what constrains us from fully embracing changes in our own academic identity and practice that might be necessary for SAP to emerge.

References

Cherrier, H. (2006) Consumer identity and moral obligations in non-plastic bag consumption: a dialectical perspective. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* Vol. 30 p515-523.

Furedi, F. (2010) Introduction to the marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer P 1-8.

Hendry, G. and Dean, S. (2002) "Accountability, evaluation of teaching and expertise in higher education." *International Journal for Academic Development* 7.1. p75-82.

Molesworth, M. and Scullion, R. (2005) "The impact of commercially promoted vocational degrees on the student experience." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27.2. p209-225.

Molesworth, M. Nixon, E. Scullion, R. (2009) "Having, being and higher education: the marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14.3. p277-287.

Molesworth, M. Nixon, L. and Scullion, R (2010) *The marketization of Higher Education and the student as consumer*. London, Routledge.

Neary, M. and Winn, J. (2009) "The student as producer: reinventing the student experience in higher education. p192-210.

Nixon, E. Molesworth, M. and Scullion, R. (2010) How choice in higher education can create conservative learners. In Molesworth, M. Scullion, R and Nixon, E (eds) *The marketization of Higher Education and Student as Consumer*, Routledge, London.

Warde, A. (2005) "Consumption and theories of practice." *Journal of consumer culture* 5.2. p131-153.

'Putting students at the heart of education', Government White Paper by Vince cable and David Willets (2011) see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/putting-students-at-the-heart-of-higher-education>