

D7 Chepstow Wednesday 5 December 15.00-15.30

Configuring the Student-Consumer (0551)

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Adoption of market mechanisms in higher education worldwide has resulted in a trend towards configuring students as consumers. The UK was the first country within Western Europe to establish a quasi-market system along with a linked consumer discourse tied to increases in tuition fees (Naidoo *et al*, 2011). Consumer status was consolidated in the Consumer Rights Act 2015 that gives protection to UK students who have purchased a service from their universities in the form of provision of education.

Politicians, the media, and higher education sector bodies have promoted a particular brand of consumer identification to convey to both applicants and students a measure of agency over university choice and educational experience and outcomes. This identification is underpinned both by what Schor (2000) refers to as the 'conventional view' of the consumer that underlies the liberal view on markets, and a trend to situate citizens as consumers of public services in order to promote democracy and improve efficiency (Trentmann, 2006). Consumers are characterised as 'highly deliberative and purposive' individuals who maximise their own well-being and interests, and have distinctive and stable preferences (Schor, 2000). To function successfully and maximise the goals of quality, efficiency and equity they must have sufficient choice, information, access, and redress within a competitive market environment (Gabriel and Lang, 2006; Powell *et al*, 2010). Comparative data, satisfaction measures and value-for-money assessment all become key evaluative tools for enabling rational consumer judgments.

Resistance to the student-consumer 'turn' within elements of both academic and student communities has been well expressed (see Shumar, 1997; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011; Williams, 2013; Tomlinson, 2016). Critics maintain that the invocation to measure a university degree against economic cost conflicts with foundational notions of pedagogic exchange, distorts student-teacher relations, and commodifies higher education. A worst-case prediction, supported initially by a series of studies on disengaged college students in the US, is that the consumer orientation is producing a new generation of undergraduates who believe they are entitled to high grades and good degree outcomes in return for their money (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002; Finney and Finney, 2010). Just as the pairing of consumer with citizen has been contested within the political sphere, the pairing of consumer with student has been contested within higher education. To be a student, it has been argued, involves a distinctive and voluntary set of moral obligations (Regan, 2012).

This paper addresses challenges linked to the consumerisation of higher education by exploring the potential for reconciling rather than contesting or contrasting student and consumer identities. The primary mode of exploration will be conceptual since the task relates to notional or normative depictions of student-consumers that have the force to prescribe meanings and behaviours (McMillan and Cheney, 1996). The economic depiction of consumers promoted by policy discourse is too narrow and misrepresents important aspects of the higher learning endeavour. At the same time, educational researchers have tended to simplify consumer relations by overly comparing education with the consumption of goods (Naidoo *et al*, 2011). Work is required to

examine the limits of the consumer figure and the extent to which these might include the student ideal.

Groundwork will include examination of the following:

The particularity of the student-consumer context

Consumption is a term that can be applied to just about anything that is 'consumed' or used. Normative judgments about consumerism and consumers often depend on the particular objects of consumption under scrutiny and are mediated by organizational contexts and ideologies (Trentmann 2004; Naidoo et al 2011). The uniqueness of the consumer of educational provision, situated as both public and private good that has to negotiate tensions between efficiency and equity, and individual and collective aims, should be articulated (Powell et al, 2010). The possibility that students could be in the market for what Love (2008) describes as a 'fully rounded educational experience' should be taken seriously.

Diverse consumer discourses

Gabriel and Lang (2006) associate the consumer label with a theoretical softness that makes it an 'obedient and polite guest in almost any discourse' and a one-dimensional 'moral hardness' that is quick to either romanticize or demonize the consumer figure. Moreover, disciplines with a stake in the consumer figure often don't communicate with one another; there is a danger that different understandings of consumer attributes result in slippage between usages. Exploring the complex genealogy of the consumer figure should guard against misappropriation in the educational context. Trentmann (2004) for example questions, 'Why necessarily presume a trade-off between a sense of personal entitlement and a sense of social commitment? People might become more involved and assertive consumers because they feel a sense of entitlement and because they want to support their community.'

Moral positioning of the consumer figure

Notional consumers are more often than not depicted in derogatory terms. They are either held in contempt as superficial and 'duped victims' of commodity culture, or framed as self-interested 'profit-maximizing entrepreneurs' (Schor, 2000). Temptation to slip into a consumer-bad/student-good dichotomy should be mediated by exploring variations of consumerism such as value co-production and critical consumerism that emphasize collective value-making and action. Nor is it the case that when something is paid for, other values are abandoned. As Sassaletti (2007) points out, 'when we leave a toddler at kindergarten, we demand that the employees look after the little one not only because they are paid but also because the child – which appears as the quintessential human being unmarked by society politics, economy – deserves attention and affection.'

Processes of consuming

Ethnographic study shows us that monetary and consumer activity is intimately tied to meaning-making. As Sassaletti (2007) states, 'If the consumer society is that in which daily needs are satisfied in a capitalist way through the acquisition of commodities, it is also that in which each consumer has to constantly engage in re-evaluating these objects beyond their price, in order to stabilize meanings and social relations'. Engagement in higher education might begin as a

commodity purchase but its quality might better be measured in the decommodification that follows.

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