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THE PIXARFICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Pixar is an animation company that is known for producing stories where objects (such as cars, toys and lamps) have human level sentience. Pixarfication in practice is a system where there is complete subsumption to commodity production and where commodities are ascribed, sentience. The concept of Pixarfication was developed through ethnographic and document analysis of advanced learning environments (Higher Education, manufacturing industries and research facilities) where AI, humans and robots work and learn together. A discourse analysis of policy reports in the United Kingdom found that in HE data had become a 'data persona' that is ascribed sentience. Data acts pedagogically in terms of offering us 'insights' or 'telling stories' about our institutions. Data 'sees us' at the level of the institution, the department and the individual. Pixarfication (like McDonaldisation and Disneyisation) provides a new, creative, paradigm to understand contemporary HE.

Paper: What is Pixarfication?

The corporate nature of Higher Education (HE) has been examined through concepts such as privatisation, marketisation, commodification and managerialism. Less frequently, corporate paradigms are employed to generalise a mode of business behaviour to this sector. McDonaldisation, following Ritzer (2000), has been used to consider how bureaucratic forms of management in HE can impose procedures and regulations on academics and students so that they are trapped in an 'iron cage' of limited agency (Hayes and Wynyard, 2002; Hayes, 2017). Disneyization (Bryman, 2004) emphasises the experience economy, the affective and the performative in HE (Roberts, 2005). It might be stated at the outset that, despite the conceptual power of these theories, there are some limitations in applying them to HE. The first is that in a global system of HE, with new corporations in ascendancy, the salience of any one corporation (particularly a United States based one) for a world system of HE may be doubted. It could be argued that there is no one single corporate paradigm that is applicable to all HEIs. For example, low cost, teaching intensive, private institutions could be adopting a 'Walmarting' strategy (Goggin, 2016). Secondly, employing any one of these business paradigms risks losing some of the specificities of HE (in terms of the intangibility of what is produced and the generally not for profit nature of HEIs) for the generalities of capitalism and marketisation (in

that a specified corporation is used as a stand in for capitalist processes as described above). The concept proposed, Pixarfication, drawn from the creative work of the company Pixar, does have similar drawbacks but whilst recognising its limitations its strength is that it allows for an analysis of the ways in which HE is increasingly driven by the anthropomorphised, increasingly sentient, commodity of data. It therefore enables an original creative approach to understand the ways in which data increasingly becomes a driver of HE processes.

The Pixarfication of HE follows Disneyization in terms of fundamentally changing the nature of commodity production. Pixar is an animation company that is known for producing stories where objects (such as cars, toys and lamps), many of which are commodities, have human level sentience. This represents an intensification of commodity fetishism. Elements of Pixarfication might include beliefs that magical or technological sentience is everywhere (a form of pan psychism), that we are in the sensory world of commodities (their gaze), that we form relationships with them and that there is speciation (an ever extending world of sentient commodities) which extends across time, eternally. A whole universe of human consumption and production activities including the internet of things, the quantified self, 'chatty factories', digital assistants and commodified relationships can be incorporated within this. This complete subsumption of society to commodity production, that commodities are sentient and are the real actors of society has become (under capitalism) a powerful principle. It is argued that this principle has become dominant in various forms of service industry, including HE.

Data in HE as real abstraction and persona

Increasingly, the distance between manufacturing and service sectors is becoming blurred as 'manufacturing as a service' and the algorithmic forms of control first developed in Taylorist manufacturing are merged. Hence similar business processes are found across a range of organisations. The concept of Pixarfication was developed through ethnographic and document analysis of advanced learning environments (HE, manufacturing industries and research facilities) where AI, humans and robots work and learn together and where products and services have ascribed sentience and agency. This concept was then applied to various HE processes of quantification and commodification through a discourse analysis of policy documents produced in the United Kingdom primarily from Universities UK and HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute).

The analysis found that commodities in HE are increasingly abstracted from students, academics and research, and exist as pure representations of funding streams in terms of quantifications, performance indicators and league tables. These commodities are not ideological constructs but are the universalising measure that drives competition between institutions. It is argued that idealist critiques of 'obsessions' with 'ideological' league table positions are misguided as these comparative indices operate as actually existing abstractions (or real abstraction, Tenkle, 2014; Kurz, 2014), that drives productivity in Higher Education. In itself the idea that league tables drive HE performance is not new but the analysis found that these data persona are not simply a type of commodity fetishism but are ascribed a form of sentience. Specifically, data is given the status of a sentient being. It acts pedagogically in terms of offering us 'insights' or 'telling stories' about our institutions aiming to provide a 'true picture' of reality in HE. Data 'sees us' at the level of the institution, the department and the individual (Beer, 2018; Thomas, Nafus and Sherman, 2018). Data visualisations and animations in HE become a data 'persona' giving data a character and a sentience.

Conclusions

HE is not separate from the blurring of the lines between manufacturing and services and the drive towards products with (real or inferred) properties of sentience and agency. In HE, where the commodity is less easily identified when compared to other sectors, this Pixarfication manifests itself in terms of the ways in which data, and league tables, are ascribed sentient and characterful properties. Data 'comes to life', animated by visualisations, analytics and AI tools. This has implications for where agency in HE resides. Rather than a paradigm as student-as-consumer being paramount as in theories of marketisation of HE, the 'inhuman power' of data is an existing, determinant, abstraction. Despite its limitations, Pixarfication offers a new and creative way of understanding this new HE paradigm.

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