WHAT IS AT THE CENTRE OF THE DISCOURSE ABOUT STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

Utilising tools provided by Fairclough (1995, 2001), Gee (1999), Rose (1999), and others, this paper explores how lifelong learning and student-centred learning have developed new, institutional and broader policy discourses and differing meanings as a result of the changing higher education policy environment.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the meaning of the terms "lifelong learning" and "student-centred learning" and how they have been mobilised in relation to online learning and the changing context of higher education. Drawing on the work of critical discourse analysts Fairclough (1995, 2001) and Gee (1999), the paper argues that, as a result of a broader societal shift, the terms lifelong learning and student-centred learning have taken on new meanings which reflect changing individual responsibilities and a shift in focus from considerations of personal growth and personal gain to those which are more closely related to economic growth and public gain. These developments have been aided by the changing and increased use of technologies in educational contexts. The paper draws further on the analytical work of Ball (1993), Marginson (2000), and Rose (1999) who have commented on the shifting policy agendas related to higher education as a result of broader societal shifts from a welfare to a more neo-liberal state, and links their discussions to ones related to lifelong learning and student-centred learning. The discussion indicates the need for further exploration of these changing discourses so that a critical understanding of possible future teacher-learner relations, and greater agency in determining their directions, may be acquired.

ANALYTIC TOOLS

Fairclough's discussions around Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emphasise the diverse and contradictory ways in which meaning may be derived from given discourses within different contexts. He indicates that texts may be read differently by readers according to their "purposes, commitments and strategies" and the specific situation in which the texts are read. He refers to this as "the reading positions the texts are exposed to" and suggests that this is "a function of the distribution of the set of contexts of reception it [the text] enters" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 128). He argues that "analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discoursal practices within which the texts are embedded" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 9).

According to Gee (1999), language serves more than one function and does more than provide a means to exchange information. He indicates that two primary functions of language – "to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both) and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions" (p. 1) – move beyond exchanging information. In this way, he argues, it is possible to see that language is always political and therefore associated with power, status, or worth (Gee, 1999, p. 2). These ideas are consistent with Fairclough's discussion regarding "reading positions the texts are exposed to," as Gee's language functions indicate the need to consider context while attempting to determine meaning.

Gee's concepts of "cultural models" and "situated meanings" further elaborate this point. Gee indicates that situated meanings are derived from words when they are used in a particular situation. He uses the example of spilt coffee, and notes that, if a mop is requested to clean up rather than a broom, then we can safely assume that someone's drink was spilt rather than the beans used to make the drink (which would be the case if a broom was requested). These assumptions are made by those who understand that the term coffee may have multiple meanings. Gee refers to this concept of how meaning is contextualized as situated meanings, and claims that they are "negotiated between people in and through communicative social interaction". Words are also associated with cultural models, which are the connected images and/or theories that are stored by individuals

who belong to a specific social or cultural group. Gee explains that the "cultural models" aid understanding of "why words have the various situated meanings they do and fuel their ability to grow more" within the codes and practices of the specific group. He indicates that "cultural models" do not belong to individuals within the group. "Rather, they are distributed across the different sorts of expertise and viewpoints found in the group…" (Gee, 1999, pp. 80-81).

THE CHANGING DISCOURSE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The ways in which the meanings of terms such as lifelong learning, and student-centred learning, have been mobilised, and have shifted to coincide with a broader societal shift which places education within a market domain, reflect the situated meanings and cultural models discussed by Gee. Lifelong learning is a term with a diversity of meanings which have shifted over time as historical contexts change. In his paper on lifelong learning, Bagnall reflects on the democratic, progressive sentiment that, in discourses of less recent times, was often associated with notions of education and lifelong learning. He states,

> Education is therefore to be directed to achieving cultural change for the good of humanity as a whole. Its case for lifelong learning is essentially that human liberation from oppression and exploitation calls for continuing vigilance and action as new forms of oppression are instituted or old ones revived in new forms. (Bagnall, 2000, p. 26)

Here, Bagnall relates the term lifelong learning to emancipation and providing opportunities for human development. This use of the term reflects an era when western societies had a greater emphasis on welfare provision – a historically brief interlude when post-compulsory education was considered a choice for all citizens, regarded as the responsibility of the community, and associated with good government. That time is over, and education now serves as valuable to economic imperatives and as an export commodity. Reference to Australia as the third highest exporter of education in the international market, which appeared in Australian Universities Quality Agency's (AUQA) submission to the Higher Education Review, supports the idea that education is now a commodity that can be bought, sold and exported (AUQA, 2002, p. 2). In the following example from the *Higher Education Report for 2004-2005* only the first

two sources of income are government bestowed; all others rely on the university's ability to raise funds:

> The main sources of revenue for higher education providers are Australian Government grants, Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments, domestic and overseas fee-paying students, other fees and charges, consultancies and contract research, investment income and other business-type activities. (Nelson, 2005, p. 123)

In such a context of marketing and fiscal pressures, the term lifelong learning becomes increasingly associated with the commodification of education. This claim is supported by Axford and Moyes who, in their annotated bibliography, examined over two hundred documents related to lifelong learning. The authors indicated

> … that lifelong learning is a term widely adopted by politicians and policy agencies as a catch-all term used to address the wide range of education and training issues that have arisen along side the economic and technological changes that have occurred in recent times .... (Axford & Moyes, 2003, p. iv)

There is a significant transformation in the meaning of lifelong learning between the definition suggested by Bagnall and that suggested by Axford and Moyes. I would argue that this shift reflects changes in educational policy trends which have resulted in education being regarded as a market commodity rather than a democratic entitlement. This policy shift is linked with the social-structural transformation that has been occurring within society over the last few decades, in which prevailing forms of government have moved from welfare states – where government was responsible for social provisions – to a state that superintends supposedly self-interested "entrepreneurial individuals" who respond to the incentives of market forces (Rose, 1999).

Two writers who discuss these issues in detail in their work on education policy are Ball and Marginson. Ball observes that educational organizations reflect changes in the wider society and are currently responding to a "policy environment" which requires that they perform in order to "become more capable, more efficient, more productive, more relevant" (Ball, 2000, p. 10). He indicates that, in order to ensure their market share and continued funding, "educational institutions will become whatever it seems necessary to become in order to flourish in the market" (p. 10). Marginson and Considine, through case studies of

seventeen universities, consider the ways that economic imperatives are taking precedence over academic issues. They discuss the transformation that is taking place in higher education intuitions where educational and scholarly goals are being displaced by a "new set of institutional and financial goals" (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 12).

Within this new set of "economic" rationales, lifelong learning is now discursively related to the development of knowledge and skills in school leavers and/or adults so that they can be useful "human capital" in work environments and in national and "global" economies. This includes acquiring the capacity to continue accessing education and/or training in order to maintain or improve their employability by gaining new skills – which differs markedly from discourses about the emancipatory potential of lifelong learning. This shift to a discourse emphasising economic growth is notable in an Australian Department of Education, Science and Training paper on lifelong learning by Watson (2003) who indicates that, in order for a knowledge economy to flourish, the workforce requires lifelong learners with a capacity to develop and apply new technologies as well as the ability to retrain for positions created as a result of the new technology. She argued that, as it is assumed "that economic growth in a knowledge-based economy is driven by workers' skills" (p. 44), so lifelong learning becomes a policy that is linked to economic growth.

In his paper about policy constructions of the concept of a "knowledge economy", Peters (2001), indicates that national governments have been under increasing pressures to develop policies embracing supposed changes occurring in the economy, work, and education, as signified in neo-liberal rhetoric about "economic globalization" and "new information technologies". This has resulted in policy making taking on a "language of futurology" and has led to "greater competitiveness and more synergistic relationships between education and the economy" (p. 12). My analysis of shifting meanings of the concept of lifelong learning accord with Peters' critical analysis of how recent concepts of a knowledge economy link education more strongly to training – as defined in terms of the needs of employers – and technological developments in industry, and not to personal development and growth of individuals.

CHANGING DISCOURSES OF STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

As well as being more closely aligned with economic growth and the needs of employers, discourses around lifelong learning suggest that learners are responsible for their own learning. Often, a concept of student-centred learning is mobilised, which places the learner at the centre of his or her learning experience, shifting emphasis away from the teacher in the teaching-learning relation (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy, 2003; O'Neill and McMahon, 2005). In older discourses of a more social democratic era, student-centred learning was linked with terms such as learner-centred education, self-directed learning, experiential learning, autonomous learning, authentic learning, and more. This link between lifelong learning and student-centred learning thus redefines the responsibilities associated with the teaching and learning process. Once again, the terminology utilised in our changing education context reflects a broader societal shift. Nikolas Rose (1999) observes that, as a result of societal changes, "…the state is no longer required to answer all of society's needs for order, security, health and productivity" (p. 174). He argues that this shift in the relational locus of responsibility for meeting needs – away from government and toward individuals – involves widespread and significant discursive technologies that construct "responsibilitised" citizens, accountable for their own destiny, who must ensure their futures are orderly, secure, healthy, and productive. As part and parcel of such "responsibilisation" discourses, students are expected to take control of their educational needs, and all the needs that follow from educational achievement. They are expected to become student-centred learners; and to be so in lifelong adaptations to ever-changing conditions of need.

Within this discursive context, institutions serve learners by ensuring learners are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities for learning that are presented to them so they can develop the skills and abilities required to maintain employment, gain promotion, and continually increase earnings. At the same time, the responsibility to ensure that these opportunities are available and are pursued is put upon the learner, rather than the institution (Bagnall, 2000). In a student-centred learning context emphasis on what occurs has shifted from teaching (and teacher focused activities) to learning (and placing importance on what happens in relation to the learner). This

displacement or shift in responsibility about learning, from state to individual (in a lifelong learning context), or from institution and teacher to learner (in a student-centred learning context), reflects the macro shifts taking place in society, as responsibility for personal economic security is shifted from government to individuals. This comparison between learning situations and broader society supports Gee's premise that language is always political. The discursive linkage of the terms lifelong learning and student-centred learning illustrates what Rose refers to as the responsibilisation of individuals. Rose mobilises the phrase in his discussion about the shifts in the ways that the social state (including education, healthcare, law and order) meets its obligations to people, and how people meet their obligations to "the social whole". He argues that, according to current discourses regarding responsibility, it is individuals who have a patriotic duty to improve their own, their families', their organizations', and/or their businesses' economic well being (Rose, 1999, p. 145). More recent discourses have defined student-centred learning as more closely aligned with online learning and with notions of students as "choosers" of what and how they learn.

Other writers have referred to changes in education and work brought about by the introduction of developments in technology and the move towards lifelong learning in relation to a knowledge economy or knowledge markets (Gorard, Selwyn, and Madden, 2003). The educational reforms that ensue from the prevalence of such arguments affect academic staff in universities – who are exposed to shifts in the meanings of their professional roles, as defined in institutionally-based policies – and related to changes in the ways that university governance operates.

THE SHIFTING DISCOURSES AROUND THE ROLE OF THE ACADEMIC

Inevitably, the shifts have also forced a change in the role of the academic who is now required to shoulder administrative responsibilities and therefore engage with the market driven institution imperatives and responsibilities. Another shift has occurred where a number of educators have articulated a conception of student-centred learning according to which the academic educator moves from the position of "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side". (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003; Elkner, 2001; Holtham and Courtney, 2005; Yazon, Mayer-Smith, and

Redfield, 2002; Zemsky and Massy, 2004). These authors have mobilised this binary phrasing to suggest that the sage on the stage – used as a negative term – is associated with face-to-face teaching; while the guide on the side – used as a positive term – is a necessity for online learning to succeed. These authors only apply this oppositional binary in relation to online teaching and learning environments. Their failure to acknowledge other contexts where the binary could have been applied (e.g., distance education) fails to acknowledge that this move to "the side" has already occurred. In a survey of online education in Australia that took place in 2002, the authors (Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien, and Tran, 2002) observe:

A number of commentators point out that the traditional role of the lecturer (the sage on the stage) is inappropriate for online courses and units, in which the lecturer quite naturally becomes a facilitator (the guide on the side) (p. 21).

Academics have responded to this by arguing that, whether they operate in an online or face to face learning environment, it is inappropriate to reduce the multifaceted function they perform to simplistic binary opposites. As argued by Denning, if these stereotypes were a true representation, more students would enrol in online courses and they would not seek "courses that include strong elements of in-person participation" (Denning, 1999).

In her criticisms of these metaphors Brabazon (2002) argues that teaching and learning is always a complex relational process, and that viable student-centred learning processes require that teachers put new kinds of intensive labour into planning and structuring the learning process to allow the "learning moment" to occur (p. 130). She claims that "…the relationship between teaching and learning is an intricate, intense dance" (p. 130). Her critique of the simplistic discursive constructions of student-centred learning illustrates how reducing the teaching and learning experience to cute oppositional binaries (such as sage on the stage, and guide on the side) reflects a failure to comprehend – or an ideological intent to ignore – the relational complexity of the teaching and learning process.

If we consider Fairclough's discussions about text analysis and its relationship with broader "discoursal practices within which the texts are embedded" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 9), the mobilisation of these phrases needs to be

considered in relation to the push to displace classroom-based teaching and learning with more online teaching and learning apparatuses (for various reasons – not least being the gross reduction in the number of academic staff relative to the number of students). In promoting fictionally simplistic virtues of distanced learning (in which students cannot expect as much assistance from the decreasing supply of educators), they disparage the face-to-face teaching-and-learning relation. The sage on the stage mockingly conjures a picture of a wizened old person performing in front of his or her students; and the valorised guide on the side suggests a more efficient and just-in-time reduction of institutional support, no longer needed by the "self"-centered learner. While there may be good reasons for increased availability of online teaching, the reasonings and justifications need to acknowledge the complex relational reality of any adequate teaching-learning process.

CONCLUSION

These constructions of lifelong learning and student-centred learning, particularly in online learning environments, appear to give students responsibility for their own learning and make workers accountable for their own success within the workplace. These responsibilities appear to allow the student to remain at the centre of student-centred learning and support the democratic, progressive sentiments around lifelong learning indicated by Bagnall (2000). However, in reality, embracing these simplistic pedagogical "solutions", rather than dealing with the complex pedagogical problems in considered ways, supports the push towards knowledge economy discourses that define lifelong learning, student-centred learning, and online learning and the links between these three discursive elements that support neo-liberal doctrines. As analysed by Rose, in the current neo-liberal state individuals are discursively constructed as newly and increasingly responsible for their own destiny (Rose, 1999, p 174). Economic imperatives, rather than pedagogic concerns have, therefore, displaced the student from centre of student learning. In order to redress this shift, research into the pedagogic effects of these shifts is required. A greater understanding of the social-structural forces leading to these changes and, concomitantly, to shifts in the meanings of terms like lifelong learning, student-centred learning, and online learning also needs to be developed. These insights may allow university

staff and students to discover what belongs at the centre of student-centred learning while providing them with opportunities to gain greater agency in determining how their teaching-and-learning futures are shaped.

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