

WACE CONFERENCE 2009

Co-op Education in an Age of Globalisation: More than Employability? A Discussion Paper

ABSTRACT

Globalisation, as understood by Giddens (2003), is a complex set of processes encompassing the political, technological and cultural, as well as the economic. The economic aspects of globalisation are seen in global financial systems, free trade, and the efficiency and accountability movements. The growing emphasis on efficiency is shaping the way we think about public goods such as education. (Gross-Stein, 2001).

In many university programs, global values have led to an emphasis on the acquisition of work-related skills and relevance to employability (Slaughter, 1990). This is one piece of a larger phenomenon, academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), which is the manifestation of global values within the university.

In a time where governments and industry view an educated workforce only as a means to a strong economy, and parental and societal pressure encourages young adults to view education as a means to a good job, what is the role of co-op education? Should preparation for the workplace be our only focus? Can -or should- co-op education provide more?

This paper will analyze academic capitalism and its context using the concepts of Gross-Stein and Charles Taylor. The effect of this phenomenon on university education will be considered. Finally, this analysis will be applied to discuss the meaning and purpose of education and specifically co-operative education in today's globalised context.

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Introduction

Globalisation, as understood by Giddens (2003), is a complex set of processes encompassing the political, technological and cultural, as well as the economic (p. 10-12). The economic aspects of the globalisation are seen in global financial systems, free trade, and the efficiency and accountability movements. In the sphere of higher education, academic capitalism is representative of the economic tendencies of globalisation as suggested by Giddens and Gross-Stein (2001). Academic capitalism is defined as direct market activity, which seeks profit and market-like behaviour, which entails competition for external funding such as grants. (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997).

The student experience in our universities is not exempt from the effects of the pressures of globalisation on education. In many university programs across North America, there is an emphasis on acquisition of work-related skills and relevance to employability (Slaughter, 1990). “Canadian universities now place heavy attention on preparing students for the economy” (Pocklington and Tupper, 2002. p. 145). Isn't a focus on employment after graduation beneficial to students and society?

This paper will focus on this question by first analyzing the ontological underpinnings of academic capitalism and its context using the concepts of Gross-Stein and Charles Taylor's thinking on modernity. The effects of globalisation on the university and university education, including co-operative education, will be considered. Finally, questions to stimulate critique of our practice (and this paper) will be raised.

The Globalised Society: The Context of Academic Capitalism

Charles Taylor has focused much of his work on the problems of modernity both for the individual and society, with an emphasis on the way in which individuals and society make meaning, and the need for a teleological aspect in meaning-making.

Taylor (1991) diagnoses society as being in a 'malaise' caused by three interrelated factors: 1) an excess of individualism; 2) the primacy of instrumental reason; and 3) and the loss of freedom, or "soft despotism".

Individualism refers to the right to choose one's own patterns of life. This is not negative in and of itself; indeed Taylor points out that many see this as one of the finest achievements of modern civilization (Taylor, 1991, p.2). However, it has a dark side: people tend no longer to see themselves as part of a larger order, or have a sense of higher purpose. The negative expression of individualism sees people as concerned only with themselves and their lives, and less concerned or even unconcerned with others or society. 'What will I gain from this?' becomes the salient question for life decisions.

Taylor calls the primacy of instrumental reason a "massively important phenomenon" (1991, p. 5). Instrumental reason refers to the kind of logic which calculates the most economical applications of particular means to a given end: maximum efficiency is the measure of success and there is little room for moral considerations. Like individualism, instrumental reason is not, in and of itself, negative. It is rather when decision-making and planning are *dominated* by ideas of efficiency, or cost-benefit analysis, with no other considerations taken into account, that instrumentalism becomes a negative. Taylor also suggests that "our technocratic, bureaucratic society gives more and more importance to instrumental reason. This cannot but fortify atomism, because it induces us to see our communities, like so much else, in an instrumental perspective"

(Taylor, 1991, p. 59). We might also put the words ‘public institutions’—such as education, health care, and other social services—into this sentence. We need only look to recent government actions across Canada to see the force of instrumentalism at work in decisions about these areas.

This leads directly to the third factor in malaise: loss of freedom. The consequence to political life of individualism and instrumentalism is that “the institutions and structures of industrial-technological society severely restrict our choices...they force societies as well as individuals to give a weight to instrumental reason that in serious moral deliberation we would never do, and which may even be highly destructive” (Taylor, 1991, p. 9). We lose freedom in such a system, both as a society and as individuals.

The malaise of modernity has caused society to become disconnected from any grounding in a larger ethical order. As a result of this disconnection, the values of modernity have become our framework. We have shifted the original idea of mutual service to that of mutual *services*, from common good to individual *goods*.

Gross-Stein (2001) picks up these themes and applies them to public conversations and shared values in what she calls today’s post-industrial society. Echoing Taylor’s ideas regarding the primacy of instrumental (and particularly economic) reason, and our collective disembedding, from any over-riding ethical framework, Gross-Stein declares that cost-effectiveness has become an end in itself and a value more important than others (p. 3). Education, she argues, has adopted this value system. One of the consequences of this is the value of education, for society and the individual, is only in its contribution to the economy.

The University, Co-op Education and Academic Capitalism

Taylor and Gross Stein provide an overview of the societal pressures shaping institutions. When we apply instrumental economic models and ‘cults of efficiency’ to universities, we have the phenomenon of academic capitalism, as defined earlier. One of the outcomes of this phenomenon is education becoming increasingly focused on employment after graduation.

This is not to suggest that preparation for the workplace is undesirable. It is not. The problem arises when academic capitalism becomes the end in itself rather than the means to an end. The university is in danger of becoming focused *solely* on matters economic and workplace related, and lose sight of our potential role in educating citizens for full participation in democracy, which is good for the individual or the community as a whole. “But this humanistic commitment to nurture the developmental potential within persons and communities is difficult to enact in a world driven by pursuit of money, power, and greed” (Welton, 2006, p. 9). Or, I would argue, in an institution in the throes of academic capitalism and globalisation. Education is increasingly seen only as a way to improve the economy; innovation and knowledge generation is important only insofar as it provides commercial benefit or job creation; students, parents (and funding bodies) privilege programs and degrees which will provide well-paying employment.

This is further reflected in the students, who act increasingly like customers, and less like people in search of an education. Education must lead to a well-paying job. The value of co-op is in the money earned while going to school and the potential employment after school. Again, this is not a criticism of these goals. But if we focus only on this aspect of co-op education, for example, we – and society- lose something.

Does Co-operative education contribute to this process? Or does Co-op have a role in countering it?

There are implications not only for individual students, but for society at large. The university has a critical role in our society as a key element in the public sphere. “Struggling for democracy is both a political and educational task...Reducing university education to the handmaiden of corporate culture works against the critical social imperative of educating citizens who can sustain and develop inclusive democratic public spheres” (Giroux, 2001, p. 33).

Implications for Co-operative Education: More Than Employability?

Preparing students for the workplace need not be seen as ‘over against’ notions educating an informed citizenry who will participate in democracy and work for the public good. If one cannot feed, house and clothe one’s self or family, it is difficult to see one will have the energy or motivation to be concerned about the public good.

Co-operative education is in a position to take advantage of the potential of situated learning. Situated learning (Lave, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991) sees learning as contextual, as opposed to more traditional learning theories which tend to dichotomize learning into abstract vs concrete and theory vs practice (Linn, 2004). Situated learning relies on social participation; the ‘newcomer’ to the practice learn from the ‘old timers’. They move from the periphery of the community of practice to the centre, with guidance from the old timers. This has obvious application to co-operative education, with our placed students ‘learning’ the ins and outs of their future disciplines from individuals already in that profession and from the organizations which host them. How will students learn to be anything but ‘handmaidens’ to their employers in this model? Linn suggests

we broaden our application of situated learning theory to include more general experiences. “ Now it becomes evident that colleges and universities have the potential to offer students the opportunity to move from the periphery towards the center many times over...” (Linn, p. 23). Might this include moving from the periphery to the centre not just in their chosen discipline, but in the critical stance which has traditionally been the role of the university and university education? To move co-operative education beyond employability skills and to resist the pressures of globalisation and academic capitalism, should we commit to the development of critical thinking as a competency within co-op curriculum? If this is desirable, then how do we as practitioners proceed in a way which is ethical, effective and appropriate for all of our stakeholder groups: our academic programs, our students and our employers.

Our future thinking and discussions as practitioners will need to consider a number of questions in contemplating incorporating more than employability skills into co-op curriculum. What learning theories are underlying our current curricula? What new learning theories or newer conceptions of learning theories should we incorporate? How could we re-imagine our present practices to build in more opportunities to develop critical thinking skills? How might we re-imagine co-operative education as a discipline? Who is most appropriate to facilitate new curriculum? What training and education might we as practitioners need to move our discipline forward? What other factors, trends, issues do we need to consider in our co-operative education curricula? These are only some of the questions for co-operative educators to consider in our globalised age.

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