

Are the changing discourses of lifelong learning and student-centred learning relevant to considerations of the first year experience as foundation?

Ann Luzeckyj, Academic Develop Team, Staff Development and Training Unit, Flinders University

Utilising tools mainly provided by Foucault this paper explores how “lifelong learning” and “student-centred learning” have developed in neo-liberal times. An exploration of these discourses has particular relevance to the first year experience because their changing emphasis provides insight into how university qualifications are seen as a gateway to improved job prospects rather than valued as an opportunity to develop better educated citizens. I suggest these issues are imperative when considering the first year at university as a foundation year.

Introduction

In order to consider how best to prepare the first year at university for tomorrow - today and adopt the principle that the first year experience is a foundation year I suggest considering how the discourses related to lifelong learning and student-centred learning developed through neo-liberal times. Although these times may have passed they led to the current financial turmoil and heightened individual concern over employability. In both eras university qualifications are seen as a gateway to improved job prospects and increased salaries. This has impacted on universities because opportunities to participate are valued differently than in situations where acquiring a university qualification is also considered as an opportunity to become a better educated citizen.

The paper predominantly (but not exclusively) considers the work of Professor Sally Kift whose Australian Learning & Teaching Council Fellowship 2006 (due to be completed mid 2009) explored *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and enhance the first-year learning experience in Australian higher education* (Australia Learning & Teaching Council, 2009). Kift (2004) identifies a range of challenges that face the higher education sector. These include increased enrolments; greater diversity among students; pedagogical changes such as a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and the encouragement of more independent learning. She also listed a range of “change imperatives” including the introduction and use of information and communications technologies; the revitalised prominence of quality and accountability; the commercialisation of the sector and increased competitiveness across it; the increased need to respond “to client/student demands; demands of lifelong learning; the generic skills of graduates and workers” and, as Kift stated, “so it goes on” (p. 2). While it is important to acknowledge the whole range of issues impacting on the higher education sector, and it is possible to consider any or all of those indicated by Kift, this paper predominantly focuses on the promotion of lifelong learning and the shift to student-centred learning.

Utilising Foucault’s discussions regarding discourse and his concept of governmentality as analytical tools the paper explores how in recent decades the discourses of lifelong learning

and student-centred learning have been mobilised to support the development of a higher education sector whose primary function is to produce work ready graduates. The consideration of these issues will aid in the development of an understanding of how changing discourses may shape the first year of university as a foundation year.

Higher education in neo-liberal times

Giroux & Searles (2006) and Brabazon (2007) argue that in a neo-liberal age higher education is closely associated with developing skills in graduates that are relevant to their employability. An exploration of government documents related to higher education policy (DEEWR, 2008; DEST, 1999, 2002) support this perspective. These documents also reveal how government agendas have encouraged higher education institutions to better align their programs with the needs of industry by ensuring that students who leave university are ready to start work in their chosen field. Government concern over the alignment of university qualifications and the needs of industry is particularly evident in the recently released Bradley review of higher education. The review stated that,

[T]he sector does seem to have been responsive to changing labour market opportunities for graduates, for example, through the growth of ‘purpose-built’ vocationally-oriented degrees directed at specific labour markets in the professions and para-professions (DEEWR, 2008, p. 23).

This statement indicates that the sector is responding to industry needs. However, the report indicates that changes are not occurring fast enough. It suggests that Australian university degrees are redeveloped so they are able to more flexibly respond to skills shortages with “tailor-made and flexible courses for older adults” (p. 24) and options for recognition and credit of knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace. If the review recommendations are successful the Australian higher education sector will predominantly focus on producing work ready graduates.

Krause et al’s (2005) report on the first year experience supports the notion that students attend university for employment related purposes. When asked to rate reasons for attending university on a scale of one to five, nearly eighty per cent of students gave ratings of either four or five to the response ‘studying in a field that really interests me’; fifty four percent of respondents gave the rating to ‘improving my job prospects’ while forty to forty five per cent of respondents gave a similar rating to ‘developing my talents and abilities’ and ‘getting training for a specific job’ (p. 12). These responses indicate that students are studying in areas that interest them but many are also studying explicitly to improve their job prospects or get training for a particular job.

While an aspect of university education has always been to prepare students for employment, in recent times the notion that students will graduate as work ready, requiring no further on the job training, has become the dominant discourse. The outcome of preferencing the notion that graduates should be work ready may be associated with a number of consequences such as changes to the courses and programs that universities offer and the way they are offered (which includes utilising online learning and student-centred pedagogies) as well as a reinforced and reworked discourse of lifelong learning. In order to apply these preferenced discourses universities need to ensure that they are incorporated into the curriculum at all levels, but most importantly as part of the students’ foundation experiences. In a neo-liberal age the emancipatory discourses related to student-centred learning and lifelong learning have been displaced by discourses that situate the responsibility for learning and successful employment outcomes entirely upon the learner. These changed discursive practices have and will continue to influence the development of foundational first year experiences of the future.

Foucauldian perspectives

There are a number of aspects of Michel Foucault's work which may be utilised to analyse the way in which discussions regarding higher education are mobilised. These include Foucault's development of a specific way of considering discourse and his development of the concept of governmentality which has been utilised by Rose (1999) Dean (1999), Burchell (1991) and others. This paper begins by applying Foucault's discussions regarding the development of discourses related to the management of time as discussed in Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison to the way that discourses around lifelong learning and student-centred learning have evolved so that they reflect the principles of a neo-liberal higher education sector which promotes skill development and work ready graduates. The paper then discusses how discourses become mobilised before considering the way that governmentality applies to the analyses of lifelong learning and student-centred learning and finally reflects on how these may impact on the first year experiences today so that this may be taken into account when preparing the foundational experience of the future.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault discusses how the activity of citizens is controlled and regulated through the effective organisation and management of time. Discursive practices evolved around regimenting time which encouraged its efficient and effective use and linked using time in this way to rewards. These discursive practices were "gradually imposed on pedagogical practice" (Foucault, 1977, p. 159). An imposition which ensured that learning was conducted in an efficient, effective and timely manner where progress was examined and recorded so that the individual learner could advance according to their abilities and in relation to a specified timetable.

Appropriate behaviour was enforced through a system of punishment and rewards that encouraged the following of rules and regulations coupled with a desire to advance. Rebelling against the rules and failing to advance was regarded as recalcitrant behaviour thus aiding the normalisation (the accepting of particular behaviours as normal) of "good behaviour". Foucault suggested that normalisation became one of the "great instruments of power at the end of the classical age" (p. 184).

Applying Foucault to lifelong learning and student-centred learning

While the "instruments of power" described by Foucault were enacted in the eighteenth and nineteenth century they are also prominent in the current neo-liberal age. Now they are reflected through the normalisation of practices related to lifelong learning and student-centred learning. In modern times lifelong learners are rewarded by the promise of continued employment and potential promotion. Individuals are accepted as normal members of society when they are employed and willing to improve their status by continually improving their skills and credentials through education.

As discussed by Edwards (2008), in Foucauldian terms, discourse is not only related to language but it constitutes knowledge by fashioning meaning. With reference to Foucault's discussions regarding power, knowledge and truth Edwards illustrates how discourses both define the domain as well as producing all of the objects of knowledge that exist within that particular domain. He also describes the way in which power which is linked to knowledge is exercised and practised across it. As Edwards states,

[M]ost importantly, knowledge links to power, not only assuming the authority of 'the truth' but also with the power to make itself true. All knowledge once co-implicated with action, has real

effects, and in that sense becomes true, or more accurately, counts as true (p. 23).

He argues that in order for discourses to become meaningful the truth making practices related to them need to become mobilised and gain prevalence. These practices must be embraced by the citizenry, who become active subjects. Within the new regime of power brought about as a result of nation statehood the ability of individuals to act is essential to the exercise of power. Edwards argues that when we embrace the discourses of lifelong learning we become its active subjects. He said,

to become inscribed within certain discourses of lifelong learning is to become an active subject of a particular sort, one for whom care of the self – the ways in which we conduct ourselves – through the technology of learning becomes an expression of (self-) discipline (p. 24).

I suggest the same argument applies to the discursive practices related to student-centred learning. When the discourses of student-centred learning are embraced, citizens become active subjects who are responsible for their own learning.

Comparing lifelong learning and student-centred learning

While lifelong learning and student-centred learning are not always explicitly connected they do share some common ground. The discourses around them both have been manipulated in similar ways, have taken on new meanings within the higher education sector in neo-liberal times and have become more prevalent in universities as a result of the introduction of information and communication technologies (particularly online learning and the use of the internet) and the widening participation agenda. They also share the common theme of shifting responsibility for learning onto the learner. In the context of lifelong learning it is the individuals' responsibility to participate in continued learning to improve work related skills. In relation to student-centred learning the learner is considered to be at the centre of the learning activity and therefore has greater accountability for its success. This link between student-centred learning and lifelong learning was identified in a government review of higher education. The Higher education at the crossroads: An overview paper stated that,

[A] learner-centred institution will ensure that students acquire and develop knowledge and skills that are relevant to the individual, employers, professional associations, labour market and society. They will inspire learning for life (DEST, 2002, p. 2).

The statement suggests that a learner-centred institution both encourages a life of learning and guarantees that students gain the necessary expertise to succeed in their chosen profession and the world beyond the institution. The statement also promotes universities as institutions that develop relevant skills so that graduates are work ready on graduation thus demonstrating how lifelong learning and student-centred learning discourses may be presented in ways that support the values present in the higher education sector during neo-liberal times. Another element common to both discourses is the shift in relation to empowerment and emancipation.

Wain (2000) suggests that where at one time lifelong learning was primarily associated with supporting emancipation, leisure and personal growth, in neo-liberal times these discourses are more closely linked to workplace learning and increased opportunities for employers to improve profit margins and employees to gain promotion and increased wages. One example of this shift is reflected in a document released in 2003 which stated the Australian government's policy agenda related to lifelong learning. It said that lifelong learning "is built on assumptions about the importance of skills in the new economy" (Watson, 2003, p. viii). The document identified the importance of education to all areas of the industrial sector which

it claimed were becoming progressively knowledge-based and therefore more reliant on highly skilled and well trained workers who are well versed in the use of technology.

Student-centred pedagogy is traditionally associated with discourses of empowerment, emancipation and equity where the student controls what and how they learn, so that it is relevant to their own needs and they are able to work at their own pace (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). While the view that student-centred learning allows students to work at their own pace remains valid and important, it is this aspect of the pedagogy that is preferenced within discourses promoting a move to online learning environments where students are encouraged to take control of their learning. Developing the skills to use technology within educational contexts therefore has a dual importance and purpose. It supports the knowledge economy as students gain these skills as part of their education rather than requiring training while in the workplace (Watson, 2003) and it allows students to work at their own pace. Bender (2003) suggests that the introduction of technology into classrooms hastened the progress of student-centred learning. He claimed that “one might say that certain technologies “drove” the centre of the classroom from the professor’s podium to the students’ desktops” (p. 2). This is because student-centred pedagogies are more easily adaptable to online contexts than those relying more heavily on input from a teacher or face to face instruction.

When considering the needs of first year students the move to online may become more complex because as indicated by Kift (2008) if first year students are to be retained their lecturers need to identify ways of adapting and responding to the changing needs of students “and accommodate known and knowable student diversity, which is writ large in the contemporary massified sector” (p. 5). The technological skills these students will have when they enter first year will be varied as will their abilities to adapt to new ways of learning. In their study of the first year experience Krause et al. (2005) found that just over fifty percent of their first year student respondents reported “that they use and value online resources as a tool for assisting them to learn at their own pace” (p. 46). This means that at least forty percent of students do not value or use the online resources available to them to assist them to learn at their own rate. These students must also be accommodated and they may require a great deal more intervention and support than is available to them. Kift (2008) suggests that by adopting a “transition pedagogy” institutions will be better equipped to support first year students. She describes the “transition pedagogy” as “a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts”.

The program that Kift developed at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) included a “student-centred perspective” (p. 9) that recognised both the diversity of the student cohort and the diversity of student needs. She advocated a range of approaches to support diversity such as the development of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and the use of mentors which are included in curriculum design; the availability of online quizzes for “students to complete at their own pace”; the employment of a “diversity of learning, teaching and assessment approaches” etc (p. 16). These activities acknowledge the need to develop a first year curriculum which recognises the diversity of student need and identifies strategies that address student diversity in a massified sector. However these approaches also place greater responsibility for learning and individual success on learners and their peers.

Autonomization and responsabilization

As suggested earlier in this paper and discussed in more detail elsewhere student-centred learning and lifelong learning have supported a shift in responsibility where learners are the primary focus and have responsibility for their own success (Luzeckyj, 2006). Rose (1999) observes societal changes have resulted in the state relinquishing responsibility so that it “is no longer required to answer all of society’s needs for order, security, health and productivity” (p. 174). He suggests that “a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization” is involved where all those actors and organisations that were once entangled within a complicated bureaucracy established to support the social state are liberated so that they may share in the responsibility for their own and society’s destiny.

In the situation described by Rose the actors and organisations appear liberated from an apparent apparatus of control over their lives and their futures but this control continues to exist, although in a different form. The individuals and communities may choose not to be self-disciplined by taking responsibility for their destiny but they are required to do so through subtle pressures placed on them by their families, work colleagues, employers, sports clubs, schools, hospitals, the financial companies who own their mortgages, car loans or credit cards and any other organizations to which they belong. These subtle pressures can be enacted because autonomous, responsible individuals who do not rely on the state apparatus for support are regarded as normal. The same normalisation process has taken place in relation to student-centred and lifelong learning so that individuals are required to be autonomous and responsible for their continued success as learners. Once these discourses become accepted as normal they become the only possible reality and are not questioned.

A number of discussions that have taken place in relation to the first year at university reflect how discourses regarding the first year have also become normalised. As discussed earlier the normalisation of discourses is evidenced by the way they become adopted by others (who become their active subjects). For example, Kift argues that first year curriculum reform needs to consider what she refers to as “contemporary realities” and should accept that students have a “reasonable desire for workplace preparedness (which correlate with employers’ expectations)”. She also suggests that the curriculum should be tailored around these and other issues so that the transition to university is eased for first year students and “both their professional development and capacity for lifelong learning” are supported (2004, p. 6). In presenting this argument Kift identifies a humanist approach and suggests strategies that support students who may not otherwise have opportunities to complete their university qualifications. In neo-liberal times and during economic hardship it may not be feasible to consider suggesting that students from low socio-economic and other diverse backgrounds attend university for other than employment related reasons. These arguments reflect the way in which the perspective that university graduates should be work ready is currently regarded as normal. This normalisation process is reinforced through government policy agendas that require students to accrue debt while studying, student expectations that they will obtain well paid jobs to pay off those debts, and in publications which discuss the many varied issues faced by staff and students across the higher education sector (Bender, 2003; Hingel, Saltelli, & Mercy, 2008; Lea, et al., 2003) etc.

The engagement of the discursive practices of lifelong learning and student-centred learning whether at first year university level or elsewhere ensures that the community of university students continues to be monitored and managed despite the apparent autonomy accorded individuals and the requirement for them to take responsibility for their own success or failure. Individuals are continually required to perform tasks in order to receive a range of incentives and rewards that encourage them to utilise their skills and abilities. They are

expected to maximise and create their own opportunities to increase their status with the added requirement of minimising their burden on the state (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006).

Governmentality

These ideas regarding the shifting of responsibilities are related to Foucault's discussions about governmentality a term which has wide ranging application and has been defined in a variety of ways by Foucault as he developed his thinking around it and by others who have adopted and adapted it (Burchell, et al., 1991; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). Governmentality is a complex notion that brings together a range of Foucault's ideas around government and the relationships of power and bio-power (Burchell, et al., 1991). Foucault defines power as "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others" but rather a mode of action that acts upon the actions of others, "an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions" (Foucault, 1994, p. 540). He argues that power is related to bio-power which refers to the "explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and control of populations" (Foucault, 1998, p. 140). Governmentality considers these "powers" in relation to the way that the various systems of government operate upon and within society. The term therefore refers to "the 'how' of governing." It questions how we are governed, how we govern and considers the relationships between the governing of ourselves, of others and of the state (Dean, 1999, p. 2). Olssen (2008) suggests that lifelong learning "constitutes a distinctively neoliberal governmentality" (p. 37).

Governmentality, lifelong learning and the first year

Nicoll and Fejes (2008) argue that governmentality's "specific focus on *relations of power*" is significant in relation to lifelong learning because it enables a particular analysis which is not "acknowledged in the everyday policy making and practices of lifelong learning" (author's emphasis, p. 5). Attention is therefore given to the way in which lifelong learning is "intrinsic to contemporary political technologies and strategies of power" (p. 5) that both delve into and go beyond the way that specific discursive practices related to it have become prominent.

In a Labour Market and Social Policy Occasional Paper the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) link education and improved life chances. The paper states that "[U]pgrading skills and competences via effective lifelong learning strategies, including increased incentives for firms to invest in the skills of employees, represents the best long-term route to ensuring that work provides a decent standard of living" (1998, p. 11). This statement indicates how the discourses of lifelong learning are being mobilised so that on the surface they reflect the codes of emancipation and personal growth while also illustrating how employers may govern the actions of employees by encouraging them to maintain and improve their skills. In the case of the university sector it also implies that universities need to ensure that students are provided opportunities to acquire the skills required by employers. Kift (2004) suggests that lifelong learning is incorporated into the "Transition" principle which is one of six broad organising principles that she recommends form the development of a first year curriculum across Australian universities. The "Transition" principle states that, the first year curriculum will support students as they "transition into first year, through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of work, professional practice and career attainment" (Kift, 2008, p. 1). This suggestion provides first year students with an opportunity to acquire the skills to continue learning throughout their lives. It may also be interpreted as supporting the potential for higher education to become a training ground for work ready graduates.

Johnston (2009) argues that “lifelong learning is an educative process of changes and transformations, which shape an individual’s way of being in society” (p. 7). Although, in his paper, Johnston rallies against neo-liberal politics I suggest that his statement about lifelong learning identifies how individuals are governed through the mobilisation of lifelong learning practices which are currently, as previously stated, essential to their agenda and its strategies of manipulation. As indicated previously in this paper and as advocated by Johnston the discourses of lifelong learning continue to support emancipation, leisure and personal growth. However they have also taken on newer meanings that reflect a distinct relationship with work and work place learning. A Commission of European Communities report which details a commitment made by Member States in 2002 to develop a set of national lifelong learning strategies explicitly states the discursive shift that has taken place in relation to lifelong learning. The report states that lifelong learning strategies include all educational and training contexts and levels and “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social or employment-related perspective” (Hingel, et al., 2008, p. 24). The statement shows how the discourses of lifelong learning have developed so that the benefits of education are returned to both the learner and their entire community including their employers. It also indicates the shifts identified by Simons & Masschelein (2006) where in neo-liberal times citizenship is established in relation to the level of education reached and where an individual’s value to society is reflected by their capacity to create wealth, both for others and for themselves.

Conclusion

Utilising Foucauldian notions of discourse and governmentality this paper has explored how particular considerations of lifelong learning and student-centred learning have become privileged during neo-liberal times. It has shown how discussions regarding the first year at university are influenced by neo-liberal notions that students should be trained to be work-ready on graduation and citizens constantly be trained and retrained to meet the needs of industry. While it may seem normal that graduates are ready to address industry needs particularly when we are facing a time of increasingly high unemployment, I suggest that we must question whether the sole role of citizens is to create wealth and if so whether the role of higher education is to ensure students leave university requiring no further on the job training. Preparing the first year of university for tomorrow – today, particularly at a time when we are looking at adopting the first year as a foundation year and in support of Kift’s transition pedagogy which emphasises equity, is an ideal time to consider these issues. It is also particularly timely if, as Johnston (2009) suggests, we are seeing the end of the dominant neo-liberalist agenda which supports notions that wealth creation is the paramount role of citizenship. It may now be time to consider that higher education may have an emancipatory function which allows the first year, as a foundation year, to foster well informed, culturally inclusive and critical citizens who are able to challenge the social and political injustices that influence them and impact on the lives of those around them.

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