The Culture Of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) In The Academic Framework: Some Literary Implications

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is swiftly emerging as an integral part of corporate culture and discourse. Associated with notions of responsibility, accountability and community involvement, it remains privileged with concerns that increasingly define the new millennium. Less developed, however, is the relevance of CSR ideas to academic communities. For universities to shrug away from CSR concerns would be to deny an essential precondition of the academic framework – accountability to the stakeholder - in this case, the students and the immediate community at large. This paper attempts to contextualize the role of the universities within the wider concerns of CSR.. While establishing the background of CSR studies, the emergence of academic involvement will also be reflected upon and finally, an example of the way in which accountability could be achieved in the literature programs of English departments will be presented to indicate ways in which literary curricula could be better aligned with the priorities of the larger, ever-expanding concerns of global literature.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; CSR; Universities; Curriculum; World Literature; Accountability; Oman; Sultan Qaboos University

INTRODUCTION

Wide ranging social concerns in the rapidly changing, and at times deteriorating conditions of millennial existence, have necessitated a re-appraisal of many foundational theories of education. With the boundaries of corporate and academic world thinning, accompanied by the shifting dynamics of education and its relation to the corporate sectors, the role of the stakeholders remains a significant area of discussion within academic parameters. While the direct link of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) toward energizing academic concerns and contexts may not be apparent at first glance, a sustained unraveling of the agenda, which includes the academic framework within the discourse of corporate responsibility, is, without a doubt, an emerging issue. This paper attempts to focus on the way in which Corporate Social Responsibility has begun to be interpreted in the 21st century, the way in which universities could be related to this emerging discourse and more specifically, the way in which English Literature programmes around the world could be reviewed in order to create a better and more sustained relationship between the university faculty, the students and the community to which they eventually return. The paper establishes the background of emerging CSR studies and traces its development from early research in marketing areas to its development into the mainstream corporate world. It then attempts to link the research of CSR into areas of academia, focusing on the ways in which studies have centralized the university as a significant site for ethical and moral debates on responsibility. A specific application of this notion is attempted with a study of a group of graduating English Literature students and their responses to the English literature curriculum as it is presently taught.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: AN EMERGING CONTEXT

Most studies of CSR have identified the early works of H.R.Bowen with his landmark *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* published in 1953 as initiating the dialogue of the social responsibilities of big

business houses. In a leading study conducted by Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee, leading theoreticians in the field of marketing management, Corporate Social Responsibility is defined as "a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources" (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Kotler goes on to focus on the concept of discretionary spending to underline the philosophy of the marketing world that establishes the fact that, in many ways, CSR is about establishing the image of the corporation but also about involving itself in the community that it is claiming to benefit. CSR has often been identified with operating in the areas of health, safety, environmental concerns and broader issues such as poverty and hunger.   As has been claimed:

...this field has grown significantly and today contains a great proliferation of theories, approaches and terminologies. Society and business, social issues management, corporate accountability are just some of the terms used to describe the phenomena related to corporate social responsibility in society. Recently, renewed interest for corporate social responsibilities and new alternative concepts have been proposed including corporate citizenship and corporate sustainability (Garriga and Melé, 2004).

It is commonly believed that CSR benefits not only the target community but also the corporations' own image and that the interplay of proclaimed outcomes and real benefits are as much targeted to the company's annual report as to the society of which it may be an integral part. Proactvitiy, voluntarism, visibility and value creation are a few intangible but strategic outcomes of the implementation of CSR concerns in most studies (Burke & Longsdon,1996 and Matten et al., 2003). While the focus of such a strategy continues to be long term and very often, intangible benefits, quantifying these rewards would become necessary in order for corporations to continue pursuing the policies in a meaningful and sustained manner. The rewards appear very often in the form of perceived approaches to the image of the firm. Igor Ansoff (1996) moots the idea that the notion of developing social strategies relate themselves to the scheme of the corporation only when the interests of the companies could be seen to be directly linked to the perceptions of the community it was serving. According to this theory, CSR as an activity can become successful only when incorporated into the dynamics of society and strategized in such a way that the benefits reaped are apparent, not only to the community at large, but also the corporation itself. A.B. Carroll's famous pyramid model of corporate responsibilities also included the economic, the legal, the ethical and finally, the philanthropic.

Historically, CSR is often viewed to have been made possible in the United States after 1953 when the Supreme court lifted restrictions that halted public funding in social activities and more specifically, with the infamous Exxon Waldez oil spill in 1989, after which a major focus was placed on corporates being made to take swift responsibility for their actions. In the 70's and 80's, corporations seem to have supported causes not always directly associated with their businesses. Craig Smith (2007) goes on to show how the early acts of philanthropy could be seen to constitute of simply writing a cheque at times to supporting long term projects that would impact society, not just in immediate marketing terms but long term strategies to remain an intrinsic part of society. To be accountable to society translates into fixed benefits for the community and Kotler remarks that institutions have a definite 'feel good' factor when involved with the community and that, indeed companies that did good to the wider world outside actually lasted longer (Kotler & Lee).

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE UNIVERSITY

In this mapping of the territory of CSR studies in the corporate world, the intersection of CSR and the role of the universities remains largely an unexplored area. To a large extent, the involvement of the corporate sector in the educational aspirations of the community have been translated into specific efforts by multinationals to enhance literacy levels in various parts of the world and promoting technology awareness to underprivileged societies. This is most commonly characterized by companies like Microsoft establishing schools and facilitating primary education in communities world wide as well as the more focused approach of corporations such as Pricewaterhouse Cooper to involve itself in community activities such as launching the "language of money" project which integrates basic educational skills with life skills and knowledge on the value and practical use of money including basic mathematical skill and financial literacy.

The notion that universities can be more specifically linked to the general spectrum of CSR activities is detailed in various forums, including the Sustainability Forum blog of Anne Raudaskoski posted in February 2010 where the author discusses the many ways in which universities could be seen as corporations with its production being the students and the market being the world into which these students return. She notes that universities are already advantaged in being perceived as being the forums for knowledge making and not marketing, and are recognized for their essential nonprofit concerns. To a large extent, this interrelationship of CSR with the universities have been, in the last couple of decades, transformed themselves to specific courses in the departments of management where studies fulfill course requirements in ethics and sustainability as well as corporate responsibility. In fact, the introduction of such courses in China have been advertised in their websites as befitting special mention, a testament to the novelty of such course designs even in the second decade of the 21st century.

That CSR could be incorporated into the dynamics of universities even outside the purview of limited management courses is best attested for by the introduction of Fairtrade practices, a label first introduced in UK in the late 1980's that encouraged the sale of local products, promoted awareness of local industries, encouraged recycling and ensure that pricing would remain competitive with the rest of the market. Such attempts at converting the university campus into more ecologically friendly zones and ensuring sustainability for local communities is a testament to the efficacy of CSR objectives in the university context. More significantly, the notion that most of these projects are initiated by the students and continue as a result of student innovations and cooperation links with the idea that community involvement is dependent on volunteerism and that accountability to one's immediate world is an essential prerequisite of CSR objectives.

Within the university system, CSR is able to successfully be implemented in its physical aspects primarily owing to the following conditions, according to Dr. Topal (2009):

- CSR is community based
- It is defined by collective responsibility
- The resources of the university are shared
- It involves young people of society
- It responds to frequent changes in perception and circumstances

In a similar vein Richard Goossen too argues, in his Sustainability blog, that CSR could contribute to the development of a university as long as it focuses on the areas of Teaching and Learning, research framework and community integration. He says, "In today's era, students still care about how universities are exercising their own CSR, from climate change and recycling to making a difference with respect to global inequities in the world" (Goossen, 2009).

Heidi S.C.A Muijen transports these immediate strategic notions of CSR to more metaphorical ideas embracing and redefining the objectives of responsibility along a more moral and ethical platform. In her article entitled "Corporate Social Responsibility Starts at University" (2004), Muijen argues for the stand that CSR could be linked with the idea that sustainability has implications beyond the simply profit driven ambitions of the corporate sector but in fact include more "immaterial aspects such as trust and responsibility, and then back from that realm of underlying moral, spiritual and social values to action, strategies and policies." (p. 235) Enumerating on the ethical stand, she adds that ethical approaches are not adequate to address and account for the implementation of long term changes in the area of corporate culture which should be inclusive of more general, mostly intangible benefits such as satisfaction and fulfillment of moral and spiritual values. She adds, "The proposed perspective of organizational (cultural) change focuses on the interesting aspect of *change through dialogue* as an effective and ethical means of innovating the curriculum, including the primary process of student education." (p. 326)

CSR AND LITERATURE PROGRAMMES IN UNIVERSITIES

It is this emphasis on the 'process of student education' that bears a direct relation of CSR initiatives and objectives to the academic programmes of universities. To a large extent, the responsibility that teaching institutions show to the community is reflected in department course objectives and declarations of outcomes. Universities are largely guided by mission statements that declare ways in which the administrative and teaching communities within

the university framework come together with the stakeholders, in this case, the students. Most university mission statements make declarations such as this of Cornell University which is "to discover, preserve and disseminate knowledge…to enhance the lives and livelihoods of our students" or that of McGill University that aims for "advancement of learning through teaching, scholarship and service to society". Translating these statements into something more than declarative generalities and ensuring the transformation of these objectives into clearly articulated and applicable conditions is thus the onus of the course programmes and the methodology used in these programmes. The universities' purported focus on sustainability, independence and self-reliance are then left to be interpreted variously by the academicians whose responsibility it is to transform general declarations into more focused, tested and practical methodology.

The stated objectives of many course outlines help, to a large extent, in articulating the ways in which literature courses could help to promote skills that ensure students' independence in varying contexts of literary studies. Terms such as 'recognize', 'plan', 'critically analyze', 'appreciate' and finally 'experience' used in the University of North Carolina 'English and Theatre' course objectives goes a long way to establish independent strategies for the student. The way in which these courses could better integrate with the community may be a complex study of social interaction and offer a tentative approach to the way in which literature courses are taught across the globe. A significant approach to CSR involves its focus on volunteering and sustainability and it is imperative that courses in literature aid in fostering such significant skills on the part of the student-stakeholder.

This may link directly to the way in which literature can be taught in the English classrooms where, in a typical situation, programmes primarily centre around Anglo-Saxon and pioneer American literature. The dissatisfaction with such strategy has been widely surmised by critics such as Layla Al-Maleh who refer to the impossibility of tackling texts like *Waiting for Godot* in the middle eastern literature classrooms. In the same vein, the viability of undertaking a programme which privileges Chaucer and Wordsworth may achieve little in regard to satisfying any of the objectives as set by the CSR framework in that they foster, neither the independence of study in many contexts nor the sustainability of interest and applicability to a local context. The implausibility of studying about daffodils in the midst of an Arabian desert or the African wilderness has been extensively documented (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2002 and Nolan, 2007). While the discourse on post colonial literary curriculum belongs elsewhere, the notion of implementing CSR legitimizes a re-thinking of the way in which these programmes are conducted. This is illustrated by a brief set of responses to a questionnaire given to graduating students of literature at Sultan Qaboos University in the summer of 2010.

The English Arts programme of the university includes a variety of courses in Linguistics, Language Studies and Translation in addition to various courses on literature which focus primarily on the origins of English literature and early American writing. In response to continuing demands and global trends, additional courses in World Literature and Arabic Literature were added, one each, to the course programme. Graduating students of this programme often find placements in public relations, banking liaison positions, advertising agencies and other secretarial and administrative positions. This Bachelors' programme is presently the most important in so far as it is the only one that contains core English courses and mainstream literature and as such, the question of doing away with the programme as it stands is not a feasible one.

The student responses to this programme is an interesting study into motivation and expectation of stakeholders and providers at the same time. In a questionnaire given at the end of the spring semester of 2010 to graduating students of English (Arts) programme of Sultan Qaboos University, questions were asked of them to identify courses which they felt would be useful for them in their career and in terms of the expectations they had for either the intrinsic value of the courses or the way in which those courses would aid in their professional life. Over 40 students of that cohort answered the questionnaire and the results of it make an interesting study of curriculum choices as seen by students. An analysis may be summed up as follows:

1. 40% of students felt that British survey courses were not useful for their professional lives.
2. 20% stated that American literature courses were not useful for their career choices.
3. All the students agreed that the most relevant courses in their programme were the courses in World Literature and Arabic Literature in English.
4. More than 75% of students said that the single course in Shakespeare should remain in the curriculum.

5.   More than 60% of students identified courses in modern drama and modern poetry as being interesting, if not useful for them.
6.   When asked what courses they would like to see added, they suggested courses in Omani literature, travel literature and more courses in world literature.
7.   When asked for additional comments towards the end of the questionnaire, students added they would like to see an end-of-course project that may involve a production of a play or any other form of independent activity, a project on individual writers that the students may prefer or even independent essays that could be published at a later point. A student added, "Our programme should include more practical side like theatre and produce plays or films. The poems of students should be published in a journal."

The above analyses make for a practical critique of the way in which the literature curriculum remains at odds with the changing requirements of the students ready to enter a different world from that of the faculty. It is apparent from this very brief questionnaire that the strategies adopted to equip students with knowledge and skills required for the professional world are, to a large extent, unfulfilled by a programme that prioritizes a very specific form of knowledge to the detriment of a more responsible, more proactive syllabus that would be better suited for a changing world of divergent concerns. Students who are going to operate in a world where English is a second language may not be required to be well versed in the language of medieval England and pioneer letters but would indeed be expected to be more aware of the contemporary world around them in terms of movements, writers, ideas and emerging literary concerns. It is interesting to note that the reaction of students is not entirely dismissive of the western canon. Courses like those of Shakespeare and 20th century British literature including novels are recognized as being central to a literature programme but the focus on the historical exigencies of western literary development have been identified as being outside the purview of English studies.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Corporate Social Responsibility relates itself to the university is many inextricable ways. Although there may not yet be an authoritative way to articulate the exact ways in which the university programmes could more directly and effectively link with the objectives of CSR, it is clear that the concerns of the stakeholders, the students and the community, as represented by the job providers, have to be made an integral part of the communication process. Imposing literary programmes which are perceived as being irrelevant and succeed only in alienating students from the very courses they have made the centre of their academic pursuit would be to ignore the increasing need to establish a more dynamic relationship between the producer (university and its accompanying systems) and the market to which it is catering. As has been previously said, "…a socially responsible firm requires simultaneous attention to the legitimate interests of all appropriate stakeholders and has to balance such a multiplicity of interest and not only the interests of the firms' stockholders" (Garriga & Melé). While the stockholders in the university system remain the faculty and other vested interests, the need for a widening in understanding of the ways in which CSR values could be more productively implemented needs further research. There is, however, little doubt that such a re-evaluation is direly and urgently needed to fulfill the role of the universities as providers of knowledge and the creators of a dynamic community.

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