Harnessing Empty Institutional Priorities: Developing Radical Student Agency Through University Teaching and Learning for Revolutionary Transformation

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Abstract: In a rapidly shifting global landscape marked by catastrophic change, instability and precarity, and misguided promises from the political apparatus, we have arrived at a dire time for higher education. It is in this moment that we dwell on the possibility and opportunity for the academic worker, student and community member to unite and challenge the systems and structures which perpetuate the status quo. Drawing on Gramsci's stratified conception of civil society and political society, we advance a praxiological activism for higher education teaching and learning that draws on elements of partnership, decolonisation and epistemological pluralism. We advance that through harnessing institutional priorities which are often proposed in the name of meeting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), we may have the opportunity to deeply challenge and transform the status quo through higher education. Drawing on examples of Student Partnership and Student Voice, and considering justice for First Nations, decolonising efforts, LGBTQI+ rights and other structural transformations to education, we propose a way towards new radical praxis. Drawing on our lived experience, conversations with community, students and staff, and our own reflective capacity building, we argue for a new age of radical agency. We also challenge dominant narratives which divide and position students in negative relation to the higher education worker, even when these narratives are perpetuated by the institution itself, in order to create space for a unified, radical and transformative way forward in the higher education sector.

Keywords: Academic Activism, Higher Education, Teaching Practice, Decolonisation, Epistemological Pluralism, Radicalism, Marxism, Cultural Studies

1. Introduction

Universities' institutional priorities have shifted a great deal in recent years, yet, pervasively, 'performance' remains the principal objective. However, from long histories of valuing performance metrics and addressing key performance criteria on particular fronts, often related to research, as core

strategy, we are beginning to see the emergence of 'projectivised' stratagems in higher education: 'retention', 'engagement', 'outreach', and so on.

Where historically, for example, the university governance apparatus may have set a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) which aimed for all research in a Field of Research to be in the first quartile against a (specific) ranking by 2025, or the nett income of a research centre increase by a set amount by 2030, we are now seeing a need for this *plus* 'outreach'. While there are not exact parallels to this kind of target in teaching and learning, we do see an overreliance on teaching and learning rankings. However, 'teaching quality' is often subjectively assessed by students, rather than by an external body who may claim to be relatively 'objective'. The turn, recently, has seen the emergence of strategic plans which are leveraging different 'key words' and 'fads' that have been used lightly by institutional decision makers as aspirations towards meeting those KPIs. What these present to the higher education workforce, however, is a vehicle for much grander, systematic transformation and change.

In this paper, we will discuss two aspects of this kind of 'fad' come 'vehicle' and how, when institutions have these as priorities, students, academics and practitioners on the ground can work under the guise of those priorities to affect dramatic, revolutionary, systematic institutional change, even if in just the confines of their teaching and learning. The first of these example priorities is a broad-based term categorically referred to as 'student voice' (Cornelius-Bell, 2022; Fielding, 2004; Varnham et al., 2016). In this context, for simplicity, we delineate between 'student voice' and 'student partnership' (though, as we have written elsewhere, this is a research delimitaiton only: Cornelius-Bell et al., 2022). For this paper, we suggest that 'student voice' tends to refer to activities in student governance, politics, representation and other forms of external engagement. At the other end of this continuum, in institutional priorities, we see 'student partnership', which is also often bound in the banner of 'retention' and 'success' for students (vis. Cook-Sather, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Here, we commonly see 'student partnership' in learning and teaching contexts; for instance, in a classroom, laboratory, seminar and so on, providing students with pedagogical 'choice' and levels of control over curricular, pedagogy and assessment (Barrineau & Anderson, 2018; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020). Fundamentally, one involves meeting learning outcomes and assessment, and the other requires application of this knowledge and skill in a variety of professional and representative contexts. We have argued elsewhere that this must be considered as a spectrum of, for example, active student participation that draws in intersections with other strategic projects which may manifest as something like 'authentic assessment' or 'real world engagement' (Cornelius-Bell et al., 2022).

By conceptualising these vehicles as possible sites for students to bring knowledge, attitudes and skills, to interface with disciplinary knowledge and expertise, and to begin to engage with 'voice' and representation positions that require external or democratic engagement outside of the institution, is to begin to 'flesh out' these otherwise empty fads which may only really seek to increase the number of students enrolments. It is here that we see immense power in harnessing these particular institutional priorities, such as active student participation, as a vehicle towards enabling more students to be part of an educational journey which engages with democracy and equity issues, and encourages radical societal change, regardless of whether they actually work in formal representation. Such a movement might also leverage students umbrella engagement with other priorities, such as through co-designing curriculum, participating in 'real world' scenarios in teaching and learning, or perhaps engaging in genuine change making in the world

around them. It is in this way practitioners may become, on paper, the dream of senior executive meeting myriad strategic priorities in a single blow.

In this paper, we discuss how political institutions have historically framed and thought of (higher) education as *the* reproducer of status quo (Gramsci, 2007). Moreover, we discuss how our institutions have, by nature of their inability to change, and through discouraging academics and students doing things differently, been very effective at removing the spaces in which contestation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment may take place. In this sense, we will further discuss the way that our existing higher education systems are culpable for the perpetuation of racism, colonialism, sexism and ableism prevalent across the physical spaces of the anglosphere's knowledge imperialism and cultural (appropriation and) reproduction for capitals ends. We introduce an alternative vision for higher education, as a real grounds to produce, for example, activist citizenry, and one which does not preclude steps towards equity, decolonisation, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-ableism.

2. Higher Education as a Site of Democratic Education

Higher education ought to be a site for democratic, radical, transformative education as a fundamental goal necessary to address global challenges prevalent in our inequitable, extractivist, hyper-accelerated late-stage capitalist world (Amsler, 2016; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Brabazon, 2021; Fraser, 2022). Indeed, the higher education classroom can be a site of empowerment for typically 'more privileged' students and we should reckon with the need to push these students to act on the massive inequalities in structures and systems prevalent across our contemporary societies. Fundamentally, we argue here that learning and teaching practitioners ought to seek collective action towards a form of 'student engagement' which is active itself, seeks socially democratic outcomes through anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-ableist curricular and encourages students to engage in real-world projects as bona fide agents of change. In this section, we will further explore how higher education workers can move towards socially democratic outcomes, and how we can understand the necessity for equity.

If we understand higher education as a system of indoctrination, vis-à-vis the process of indoctrination into the current prejudice and choices of a given culture qua Doris Lessing, we start to understand that the systems and structures that abound in higher education are indoctrinating and indoctrinated (written and read) in the systems that benefit and privilege that higher education system (c.f. Oliver & Morris, 2022). To challenge this can be seen as a fundamental challenge to the existence of these systems. Indeed, this weak argument has been used historically to limit the power of worker demands for change in educational systems (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). We know that, across the last five years, higher education has been in an increasingly dire, precarious and problematic state, and that traditionally, the education apparatus has served as a tool and site for reproduction of dominant society, even if this is now beginning to lose its place (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Gramsci, 2007; Katz, 2001). This is amidst massive transformation in Australian higher education, which has introduced a litany of cuts, restructures, funding changes and a destabilised, narcissistic managerial class (Connell, 2013; Cornelius-Bell, 2021b). There has never been a darker moment for higher education institutions (Fleming, 2021).

Higher education institutions are being so devalued and removed from public discourse that narratives around the emerging reduction in funding and support are par for the course and accepted as necessary

amidst other arcane neoliberal political narratives. Even arguments which 'supported' higher education now seek to destabilise, for instance, achieving 'job ready graduates', which is narratively a failure of universities to achieve twenty-first century needs. In what could be seen as a backslide to the Gramscian era of educational privilege, higher education providers internalise the rhetoric of 'no need for a degree to secure a job', where they self-flagellate in their public image to grovel for student enrolments. Though the backslide is more severe (rather transforming human individuals from 'uneducated', essentially empty in the banking euphemism (Freire, 2014), towards someone more worldly, rounded and understanding of methodologies of a praxis), we are hybridising history to create a new nexus which reproduces the status quo through ruling class propaganda (Gramsci, 1977), not real educational modalities. The university itself, historically, served great value to the ruling class by reproducing knowledge and tools that were necessary for capitalist society. Now, with a growing population, the number of individuals with access to a higher education which enables higher level thinking and an analytical and critical lens on society, we see why higher education institutions are also shying away, in their narrative, from perpetuating their role as establishers of critical thinking amongst students: because it threatens the ruling class who fund them. Connecting to politics, this reframes and justifies the transformation of higher education institutions to either diminish or pivot towards 'job readiness' as a new narrow outcome. Alongside this, *sua sponte*, we see the hegemony devaluing genuine student agency and fulsome participation. That higher education is offering students a 'true' and 'robust' way to engage with equitable democratic society is no longer the case, yet could be if we challenge the narrative we reproduce with our academic work.

3. Student Agency and Activism

There are a growing number of pervasive narratives facing students entering higher education today, from the front page of the almost exclusively Murdoch-controlled news-media propaganda machine that is dominant in Australian culture, through to the narratives that universities themselves use to sell degrees to students (Brown, 2015; Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017). We recently heard an academic say, 'my students don't even get out of bed for class', and later that same day witnessed an Instagram advertisement for an institution (that we shall not cite), which claimed 'you needn't get out of bed to participate in our online university classes'. The narrative, then, that is fed to students who undertake a higher education program is that they do not need to have fulsome engagement; they can passively receive, and they will check the box for just being a name on a screen. So, when we receive these students in our classrooms and they are not ready to engage fully and democratically with society, equity issues and the grand challenges that are facing humanity, collectively, this should come as no surprise. Rather, we need to seriously think about the way that we structure higher education: curriculum and pedagogy ought to be designed such that students have no choice but to engage in a fulsome way, with issues of both the discipline and issues of the world around them. For, as much as we might disagree with the language used around 'job ready graduates', *prima facie* it requires students to have some kind of engagement with 'the real world'. This is of course not to, as the Australian 'job ready graduates package' has, discount engagement with academic discourses, but rather to suggest we must create synthesis of academic discourses and engagement with serious and systemic issues that are prevalent in our society, especially as these are often ignored, mostly by institutions, including higher education, politics and the news media.

In this complex and politicised space (the higher education classroom), we have immense opportunity to challenge the status quo (Freire, 2014; Gramsci, 2007) under the guise of leveraging those empty institutional priorities which we introduced in the beginning of this paper. In this politicised space, other narratives about students seek to drive division: 'my students don't do the work', 'artificial intelligence is replacing my students' essays', 'my students are all cheaters', 'my students are lazy', or 'they're just disengaged because they're youth and that's what this generation is like'. Each one of these lends only to justify the status quo, supplement creating class division, and to divide knowledge holders against knowledge seekers. In this way, yet another division of knowledge, understanding and skill development emerges as a result of capitalism's unequal hierarchies (Gramsci, 2007). Let us challenge these conjurations to reframe this thinking using a students' voice.

Last year, a student said to one of us, in the context of discussing similar pervasive negative narratives, 'I don't participate, because I want to subvert your expectations of my participation'. Let us dwell on this for a moment. If we understand that students' activism in contemporary times is quite different from students' activism in historic times (Altbach, 2007; Cornelius-Bell, 2021b), we start to understand that students are subverting the expectations, norms, roles and rules that capitalism has asserted over education apparatuses and systems for generations. We may not like this because it means that we have a harder time engaging students from where they 'are at'. But, it also means that we have incredible opportunity to learn from our students. Therefore, again, calling back to, say, Freire's models of education (Allman, 1994), or to more recent turns into culturally responsive pedagogy and decolonised epistemology (Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney, 2020; Zembylas, 2023), we can start to see that learning *from* and *with* our students can create a better way forward. While we may have prescribed learning outcomes for a course of study, or particular understandings that we need to address in order to move forward, we can ultimately create a space where students are able to subvert capitalism's expectations of them and learn disciplinary discourses. Then, students may harness this nexus of desire for social change and the enhanced understanding of disciplinary discourses to, at an informed nexus, shatter and transform that system. However, the nuance cannot end here, for we have had, if briefly, access to these kinds of opportunities in higher education historically and have not been successful. Rather, in our model, we would assert that students need to be empowered to retain their own external subversive and activist tools, thinking, and possibility. Theorists have written using educational discourse, language, theory and practice for generations and, while powerful, they have failed to systematically transform higher education up until this point. Perhaps bringing new tools is now required (c.f. Lorde, 1993).

4. Stratification of Society

Gramsci (2007) contended that society was broadly compromised of two social strata. First, there is civil society, a strata of people who fulfill a majority of the work of that society. It is helpful to think of this as the 'working class' and 'middle class', and perhaps inclusive of an emergent upper class or an upper middle class in some systems; these people are primarily responsible (regardless of how they may describe themselves) for the production of wealth for a strata 'above' them. Second, there is political society, a strata of people who govern, manage or otherwise extract value from civil society, living in high comfort and creating social dictums, which support their privileged position. This has been recently termed by activists as 'the 1%'. When we understand this stratification of society, we can also see how microcosm

versions of these emerge in various contexts. These stratifications and abstractions work to keep distance and unity away from 'civil society' and prevent a true revolutionary end (which Marxists conceptualise as a communist revolution). Here is where our problem lies (from above): the more that we move blame to students and ignore the opportunity to seize institutional priorities as possible vehicles for radical transformation towards bona fide systematic transformation of higher education, the more we capitulate to the demands of capitalism.

Over time, political society has established systems of conditioning and control which reinforce their 'rightful' positions as rulers in this way to the point that it 'feels' ontic and unchallengeable. Adding modern anxieties and tensions such as precarity and debt (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021), these rulers sit pretty in their positionality reinforcing social conformity. Moreover, so pervasive is the culture of these political society rulers that they have successfully latched on to and enculturated education systems, making them enforcers of capitalist ontology. We know from Marx and Gramsci that capitalist ontology, or capitalist systems of production, and modes of operation, are built on inequality (Gramsci, 2007; Marx, 1977). But, they are also built, as Fraser and others suggest, on extractivism, faulty principles and the stealing of knowledges, powers, understandings, ways of doing and positions of First Nations around the world (Fraser, 2022; Nakata, 2002; Watson, 2014). Moreover, they extract knowledge and production from academics in academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). For example, the institution benefits dramatically from the knowledge production, extraction and reproduction that is carried out by academics (regardless of episteme or cultural knowledge). This also enables institutions to inscribe particular values which researchers themselves may not agree with but must capitulate to in order to maintain their position. Here, again, the opportunity to draw on institutional priorities surfaces as a possibility to subvert expectations.

We can, though, take a tentatively hopeful message from this model of reproduction because, as we know from Marxism, 'the working class' holds a great deal of human power and potential. Acknowledging the enormous power and weight of hegemony, we can conceptualise ways to unpick 'the system' towards a dynamic system of 'reproductions' largely deputised to academics – and importantly, what is being reproduced is not fixed. Over time, we have seen systems and structures move to accommodate social change which has been demanded by civil society. For example, there has been dismantling of segregation, land rights movements, decolonisation of and through institutions, women's rights, particularly the right to vote, increasing LGBTQI+ recognition, and so on. These social victories, which are now taught about in higher education, if poorly, are always at risk and tenuously held and are values often not located or enacted in higher education.

However, these changes have been inspired in civil society, not political society. These changes have been inspired through activism, but also through significant scholarship (c.f. Walker et al., 2022). At the nexus of activism and scholarship is where we see students being able to bring their knowledge, understandings and ways of being to classroom learning and teaching. Here, we need not wait for a research project to understand about human rights, but rather ask students to identify what they conceptualise as human rights. Of course, we can see snap backs and changes to modalities that are significantly damaging to particular populations. For example, the United States has recently started to move towards repealing significant rights gains that have happened across the last 20 years. This does not mean defeat, but rather another

rallying cry to challenge the human cost of such regressions. Moreover, we must acknowledge the significant and ongoing oppressions and rights violations which continue to be perpetuated despite, and because of, the imperialistic nature of capitalist hegemony, both in and out of the institution, including, the significant exploitation, extraction and theft of (in our Australian context) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and lives (Fraser, 2022; Nakata, 2002; Sherwood, 2013).

In seeing an ongoing 'tug of war' between civil society and the political class over what surmounts to human rights and recognition of sovereignty has also been painted, at times, as a 'distraction'. This deeply problematic depiction sees these necessary changes as 'cultural moments' which serve to keep civil society busy rather than unified and striving towards a more equitable general structure of the economy. The core message that a fight for human rights should be set aside while we 'struggle for liberation' is guilty of this accusation. Rather, what we must do is ensure we are very careful about how and what we 'reproduce', who and what we engage with, and how we support students with their navigation of knowledges and understandings. Moreover, as thinkers and leaders we must support colleagues to engage, particularly with the rapidly shifting and cutthroat environment that is contemporary capitalism, to ensure solidarity and broad engagement with new modes of activist education, particularly when we understand that higher education itself is very good at placating (and distracting) its communities.

Access to the tools of activism has not always been democratic. The tools of radicalism, and particularly the tools of radicalism that were successful in creating transformation in the past (Cornelius-Bell, 2021b), were not always available equally to all people. Currently, in higher education, we empower only certain groups with those tools – even if we think of these tools as simply 'modes of communication' or 'engagement with professions'. Here, we should start to think of, returning to the earlier example, active student participation as an example of an institutional priority as a tool for democratising radicalism and moving towards an activism that actually serves more people, rather than a narrowing and limited agenda 'for the few'. Importantly, thinking about representations of curriculum, we ought to ask: Who do we listen to? Who is presented as a knowledgeable source? What privilege do they hold? Why do we value that voice over another? Are we enabling our students to learn with and from one another? Are we embracing cultural diversity in our classrooms? Or, are we simply reproducing dictums which have been carved into chalkboards for generations? These questions might help us choose better curricular resources, but also require solid self-reflection and peer review (outside the academy, too). We believe that through agendas such as decolonisation, we are starting to make moves in the right direction. In this case, by actively valuing First Nations voices around the world, we are starting to become more receptive to diversity and plurality in our ways of 'understanding' and teaching. However, this is not enough. We must train ourselves and our students to listen and respond to the worlds' needs in the multifarious forms that that takes – and taking up the mantle of empowering our students to change the world with their praxis.

So far, we have advanced some notions of how we might think about revolutionary transformation in teaching and learning through harnessing institutional priorities. The process to engage with this can be quite simple: map out the learning objectives a course, negotiate these with students, negotiate how to 'get to' these, and ensure students bring in their knowledges, the things they care about, and ensure that we address those in the ways that we assess. We begin to see here a pattern emanating from basic 'constructive alignment'. Rather than an adherence to 'specific content', which has existed for hundreds of years and

serves to reinforce the status quo, we start to open diversity of perspectives towards addressing the learning outcomes required in our courses. We start to negotiate outcomes with students so that they are more able to engage with the world around them. And, we start to challenge our pedagogy so that we as academics are not the 'knowers' and 'forcers' of particular ways of knowing being and doing, but rather as creators of opportunities for a plurality of perspectives. When we start to 'radically' rethink what we are doing in higher education towards, for example, inquiry based activist pedagogy, which is deliberatively inclusive, and engaged in activism and community education, where we have decolonised our curriculum, and where we include and hold space for voices of those who have been historically marginalised, othered, excluded and pushed out by the academy, we move in a direction which enables contestation of curriculum. Critically, we will have no serious side effects if we are harnessing 'institutional priorities' as vehicles towards this change. Moreover, increasing the level of authenticity by engaging students in what is important in their life-worlds can hardly be read as a bad thing in the age of 'student gets what student wants'.

The alternative to making this change is that we continue with higher education institutions as reproducers of a dated status quo, which drives us into obscurity. This mode does not see a victory for the progressive thinkers, the radicals and revolutionaries; rather, it sees education moved out of reach for many and would continue to be exclusionary and placating for the students who have passion. In a way, we do nothing (or 'a lot of nothing') and see nothing happen. This comes at immense cost now, to ourselves, and future generations, due to the inevitability of higher education being deemed as a useless site of failed reproduction. We are already in the midst of racist, colonial, ablest and sexist higher education systems (Connell, 2013, 2019; Crimmins, 2019; Laccos-Barrett et al., 2022; Merchant, 2020; Yunkaporta, 2019).

We describe the academy as 'neoliberal' and precarious, but fundamentally we are only serving to understand the world around us through a capitalist ontology (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021, 2020; Maslyukova et al., 2021; Rotar, 2022; Shermer, 2021). With this has come a rise in corporatism, particularly in the management and running of institutions (Knopp, 2012; Wood, 1995). Supporting this has meant a dehumanisation of students and staff, as well as the community who are active participants in the higher education context, yet are othered, excluded and extracted from it in order to enable the extreme privilege which higher education harbours (Giroux, 2022, 2005). We are moving towards an ever-increasingly measurable and quality obsessed institutional model, through measurable curriculum, stagnant pedagogy, and an epistemological singularity which aims at only reproducing 'the' dominant narrative, the hegemony, which does not serve most of the students we engage in our classrooms (Brown, 2015; Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Sheedy & Griffin, 2018). Through inquiry-based, activist, decolonised, multi-perspectival teaching and learning, we could genuinely create a space of social transformation, instead of something that is disempowering for students, staff and community.

5. Conclusion

We have endured massive changes to the way our structures and systems work in education, politics and society broadly. Our students' experiences of education is radically different from even the experience of students just ten years ago. What faces students now is incredibly bleak: from the memes to the media, from COVID to climate change, from political transformation to civil unrest. The way that we are headed

now is only chipping away at this, in very small pockets and the unitary conversations that we need to have in order to move towards a genuinely better society are not happening as quickly as we need them to. We have a unifying imperative to bring together all of these different issues to create space for students to learn collectively about what is going on in the world around them and to challenge it.

We have incredible opportunity to harness hollow priorities asserted in strategic plans to make a difference. Together, in a negotiated and educative mode, we have incredible potential to unite. While that is scary to the political class and its delegates, what we can achieve through higher education and through our engagement with community, offers genuine potential for a better world. Education offers us a pathway to liberatory praxis and liberatory revolutionary transformation, be it social democracy, or something radically new. This practice must be shared beyond higher education. We cannot simply contain our work to our classrooms. Reaching community around us must now be a priority to reassert the liberatory possibility for education. One of the greatest ways to achieve this is to support and empower our students on their journey through this complicated and difficult world, just as our educators empowered and challenged, suppressed and restrained, or changed and guided us.

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