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Progressive practice, markets and managerialism



James Avis

It has become commonplace to bemoan the impact of a crude managerialism upon education. The concern with cost and efficiency and the incorporation of scientific management within post compulsory education is understood to undermine educational principles and rests upon the metaphor of the 'speed up' which is both seen and experienced as harmful. This form of managerialism sits well with the development of markets within and between educational institutions. Student charters and quality procedures rest upon models of consumerism and production introducing the unwarranted logic of the market place. Ironically in the name of efficiency we experience the proliferation of forms of accountability that rest almost exclusively upon the most banal bureaucratic mechanisms. An argument such as this is easy to make, it resonates with our lived experience of education. The 'speed up', of doing more for less, the constant productivity deals, teaching larger classes with the resultant increased work load, the expansion of administrative tasks, and exponential growth of meetings and so on. I could go on and itemise the

minutiae of changes in the nature of our work which cumulatively reconstitutes our role as teachers.

There is however another process that sits alongside those already mentioned which derives from a far more progressive current concerned with teaching and learning located within an apparently benign managerialism. It is here we meet with those well rehearsed arguments which tell us we teach too much and that by doing so we inhibit the development of learners. We are told that the learner should be nurtured in the educational process and that we should facilitate their learning by providing the optimum conditions. A thoroughly learner centred approach would deliver such an outcome. We should learn to limit our interventions, silence our voice so that learners can win theirs, and above all see ourselves as facilitators of the learning process. Our work becomes transformed, we are no longer centred upon an engagement with subject based knowledge, for as with any other commodities this is prone to redundancy. We become centred upon the development in our charges of those enigmatic core and transferable skills which allegedly

produce the disciplined (non-) workers of the post-modern age. The use of workshop and IT become endemic.

Underneath the progressive rhetoric of such change lies the logic of the market. Clearly this is a parody but it raises real issues. The critical potential of an engaged dialogue with students is lost. There is a move towards reliance upon materials produced and developed by others which serve a qualitatively different agenda. Not only do we as teachers become deskilled but so too do our students. The illusion of learner centredness becomes a fiction that masks greater control.

There are two responses to these processes. One is to appropriate whatever spaces are offered in the classroom / workshop to develop critical practices. The second, on a more national and long term scale, is to use the language of learner centredness to struggle for the resources and practices that an emancipatory education warrants.