

Interrogating the goals of work-integrated learning: Neoliberal agendas and critical pedagogy

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Neoliberalism provides the grounding discourse for current alliances between universities and businesses. Work-integrated learning (WIL) within the university environment, where students learn about themselves and the world-of-work, is well-suited to this current global economic discourse, and is seen as a valuable asset to vocationally oriented subjects such as engineering, medicine, education and business. What happens, however, when a pilot in Bachelor of Arts internship, grounded within the language of Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy, confronts neoliberal agendas and the language and practices of a market-based economy? This paper, based on research with seventeen participants in a New Zealand university pilot Bachelor of Arts internship program, documents the power of neoliberalism. Participants reproduced neoliberal agendas in their description of themselves, their socio-location and their future goals. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2011, 12 (3),175-182).

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In the global marketplace for tertiary education, universities continually articulate how their graduates will meet current and future needs of the global economy (Barrie, 2004; MacFarlane, 2009). Universities around the world promote the nature of the education they offer to their students through a description of the generic qualities and skills their graduates possess. In a global economic structure that constantly requires new knowledge and an educated workforce that supplies both producers and consumers, universities become a significant player within this economy. Indeed, universities are the conduit in this new knowledge economy as they provide the research supporting new products, the educational training for the new workforce, and the 'educated' consumers willing and able to purchase those products. With the recent global economic downturn, however, governments around the world have cut educational funding, forcing tertiary institutions to explore other avenues of support to ensure their survival. Forming alliances and garnering support from corporations and other large research grant-awarding institutions appears, on the surface, to be a win-win solution. Tertiary institutions adapt to the rapidly changing demands of the global economic marketplace supported and guided by industry demands, producing high-tech products, industry-ready workers and high-income consumers. Work-integrated learning within the university environment, where students learn about themselves and the world-of-work, thus seems to be well-suited to the current global economic situation.

These win-win alliances between universities and businesses are grounded in the language and practices of neoliberalism and the knowledge economy (Darmon, Perez, & Wright, 2006; Higgins & Nairn, 2006; Lauder & Hughes, 1999). As a set of social and economic policies, neoliberalism seeks to transfer part of the control of the economy from the state over to the private sector, ideally, to produce a more efficient government and improve the economic indicators of the nation. This privatization of formerly public institutions, like universities, is grounded in the assumption that the private sector responds more effectively and fairly through market competition and incentives. For organizations, success in the competitive marketplace is seen as a valid indicator of efficiency and innovation (Gauld, 2009). Education in this scenario becomes key to both the nation's and the individual's economic prosperity, merging educational and industry objectives while shifting the focus from student needs to student performance. Neoliberal inspired policies provide performance measurement tools

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that help governments micro-manage and compare schools and systems, devising subsidized competition in governed education systems in order to manage and control educational objectives and outcomes for the good of the nation in a global economy. The new knowledge economy discourse thus links individual and institutional education objectives to the labor market, with the purpose of education presented as the path to economic security. Individuals and organizations work hard to harness their own abilities and talents to compete in the marketplace, without relying on government or the 'nanny state'.

This mingling of education and industry objectives, however, invites questioning around the purpose of a university education. When the political and social relevance of education is dismissed in the economic language of measurement and quantification, when university education is idealized as producing graduates who are skilled and flexible workers for twenty-first century industries, when students themselves seek a university experience that is geared towards a smooth transition into professional practice, questions must be asked about the role of the university to develop a capacity for the public good beyond market and employer considerations. In this scenario, the great moral purpose of education is silenced, reduced to merely serving the needs and demands of business.

Indeed, when a neoliberal, market-values orientation is applied to the university setting, educational ideals and graduate attributes are usually re-structured to become more responsive to the needs of employers, viewing students as "human capital" (Coffield, 2000) available to be developed. In this sense, education is not viewed as a means of individual and social emancipation or transformation, but as an 'investment', with students targeted and attracted by the promise of university qualifications improving both their labor market and consumer power potential. Discourses of choice, education, work and lifelong learning are connected to the market, their dominant meanings becoming an iteration of economic and market discourses.

The analysis of the tension between education as complicit with, or resistant to, industry-training has a long international history. In 1915, United States educator John Dewey besieged educators to prevent this co-opting of education by the needs and demands of business:

The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which will adapt workers to existing industrial regime; I'm not sufficiently in love with that regime for that. It seems to me that the business of all who would not be educational timeservers is to resist every move in this direction, and strive for a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial society, and ultimately transform it. (p.42)

For Dewey, one of the highest goals for education is the transformation of the industrial order. Similarly, the pioneering work of the South American activist and educator Paulo Freire (1973) entreats educators to strive for a just and democratic society beyond market orientations:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

Conceived through these emancipatory lenses, education should do more than just train workers/consumers. It has the potential to generate citizens/professionals who work for social justice rather than reproducing conformity to the status quo. In the Freirean/Deweyan conceptualization, education should emancipate its citizenry to help them become active moral agents (Bronner & Kellner, 1989; Geuss, 1981; Habermas, 1972).

The tension between these Freirean/Deweyan pedagogical ideals and neoliberal agendas culminate in current tertiary teachings within the Liberal Arts. Liberal Arts degrees focus more on “transformative learning” as an explicit goal (Brookfield, 1994; Mezirow, 1990), and are obviously less vocationally oriented than other degrees in engineering, computer science, medicine, or commerce. Within New Zealand, government support for neoliberal enterprise ethics, and financially successful research outputs, has eroded provisions for the humanities and humanistic social sciences (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Higgins & Nairn, 2006). This eroding government support is echoed within the broader community. Indeed, during a second round of acrimonious restructuring at the University of Canterbury, a 2008 editorial in a local paper questioned the relevance of the Bachelor of Arts in the twenty-first century, identifying the B.A. degree as standing for “Bugger All”, a colloquial, and rather derisive, term for nothing² (Editorial, 2007, A21). Lacking financial and popular support, the College of Arts administration realized the need to demonstrate the ‘real-world’ applicability of the Bachelor of Arts degree. The answer was an internship program designed to both counter this type of negative commentary, and eventually to work with and capitalize on the university’s neoliberal investment in the enterprise and innovative ethic. The resulting new internship course, ARTS395, would integrate theory and practice, linking business and community organizations with the lofty ideals of critical pedagogy.

Run in 2010, the pilot course of ARTS395 comprised seven internship projects established in both for-profit and non-profit organizations. The selected interns passed through a highly competitive process of applications and interviews, and once enrolled in the course, were supervised on their project by a site adviser, while also working individually with an academic adviser, and participating with the other interns in weekly lectures, online discussions, and self-reflexive STARR (Situation, Task, Action, Results, Reflection) reports facilitated and assessed by the internship director.

AIMS & METHODOLOGY

In pedagogy, structure, and orientation, ARTS395 attempted to incorporate emancipatory education principles while working within the real world of a neoliberal environment. The aim of the current analysis is to evaluate the success of that endeavor through close attention to the tensions between discourses and practices in the participants’ interpretations of themselves and their experiences.

At the beginning of the course, all seven interns participated in an online open-ended survey of their orientation towards internships and their degrees. At the end of the course, all participants, including site and academic advisers, were asked to participate in hour-long interviews. In total, seventeen participants agreed to be interviewed: one man and four

² Indeed, the editorial in *The Press* portrayed the degree as “easy,” a “cop out,” and the bachelor of “Bugger All” in which “students are allowed to take pseudo courses like cultural studies, [and] gender politics.”

women academic advisers, three women and two men site advisers; and all seven stage-three women interns from various majors within the B.A., ranging in ages from 20 to 28. The interview questions were open-ended, running from specifics of the program to more abstract and broader questions around the purpose and goals of education in the twenty-first century universities. Interns' bi-monthly STARR reports also provide insight to their negotiations of tensions and are included within this analysis. The research was approved by the University's Human Ethics Committee.

Neoliberal perspectives are pervasive and expressed through multiple and interlinking couplings such as government policy and practice, labor-market rhetoric of success and failure, education and training objectives, and media and managerial agendas (Bansel, 2007). These sets of relations and their material effects are articulated and reproduced at multiple sites and in multiple ways within daily life. Of the many interconnected reiterations expressed by the participants in ARTS395, this article will specifically explore only the concept of choice as one part of the neoliberal fiscal relations or coupling.³

Choice is not a value-neutral concept. Indeed choice and the making of choices reveal and situate social location in terms of race, gender, class, disability, age, etc. For example, the multitude of choices available to and made by a white upper-class woman will be different from the choices available to and made by a lower-class black man. Choice, in this sense, could suggest the expression of autonomy or, alternatively, the multiple social-structural restrictions associated with a lack of choice. The aim of this study is to explore the tensions surrounding the participants' interpretations of choice, analyzing the fiscal relations of power negotiated within internships grounded in an emancipatory education tradition.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

In their post-internship interviews, all site and academic advisers were asked to comment upon a hypothetical conflict between a site adviser's and an academic adviser's selection of an intern. All but one said that the site adviser's opinion should dominate.⁴ Many reasons could support one opinion over another, but for the site advisers, education, work and choice were linked with money.

Site Adviser Randel⁵: The site advisor should have the say. They're paying the money.

JJ: So the money talks?

Randel: Money talks.

Site Adviser Bob: If the employer is paying the money for it, they should get someone they'd like. I would think that seems fair. And I mean with academics, you don't have a choice who comes in your class right? Or even with graduates, usually you assume someone who is qualified in your area, you should take them. So I

³ For more information on critical and theoretical interpretations of 'choice,' see Bansel (2007), Marcus (1986), Rose (1999) and Self (1993).

⁴ The one site adviser who did not agree was based in a community service organization. She would not say whether one adviser should have more say, but instead insisted that discussion and arbitration should ensue if a mutually-agreed decision could not initially be reached.

⁵ Pseudonyms used for all participants

think, yeah, I think academics probably wouldn't be used to having that choice anyways. So I think it would probably be the employer because they're used to having a choice of employees.

For site advisers, employers' choices should dominate. Based on their contribution of money and their assumed wielding of power, they interpreted academics as accommodating and compliant. Significantly, academic advisers expressed similar views:

Academic Adviser Anna: I would say that the site advisor should have a little bit more, because they are the ones who are in the field.

Academic Adviser Chris: Because it's their workplace. As academics we're quite used to at least the fantasy of rule by committee and all that sort of stuff. Often workplace people are not, that's not their mode, you know.

Academic advisers also agreed that the site advisers' opinions should determine the choice of the intern, based on each adviser's respective social location. They suggested that the important criteria should be based on the site adviser's relevant knowledge and experience in the field, while the committee orientation undermined any academic's individual preference or evaluative positioning. Even though these academic advisers were critical theorists, experts in the knowledge area of the internships, and had first-hand knowledge of the applicants, they too deferred to the site adviser's choice.

In this sense, the power of the site adviser's choice dominated. Choice, coupled with money, power, expertise and social location, ensured the intern selected would meet the needs of the employer over everything else: over academic insight into students, over priorities of learning, over the larger values of social equality or the collective good. These site advisers' choices, deferred to by the academics, worked to support the site, the wielders of money and power, as more influential.

This deferral directly connects with how the interns interpreted their educational choices and goals. Indeed, all interns articulated a deep investment in neoliberal and market-based ideologies, this in spite of various targeted readings, several lectures, multiple video clips, and online and in-class discussions that framed challenges to neoliberal ideals. As an example, Peter Bansel's "Subjects of Choice and Life Long Learning" (2007) was assigned as it effectively critiques the oversimplification of the idea of choice as free choice. Using accessible and relevant life-history interviews, Bansel illustrates a broader Foucauldian discursive analysis and challenges dominant culture interpretations that ignore the crucial role of the economic, the historical and the political influences on the concept of individual choice.

In one of their bi-monthly STARR reports, the interns were specifically asked to reflect on the Bansel article and its critique of the concept of choice. Significantly, all seven of these competitively selected top students ignored Bansel's critique of the neoliberal choice discourse, and instead used Bansel's description of the dominant discourse surrounding choice, to situate themselves as freely making responsible, good choices.

Intern Marie: For me, Bansel's 'Subject of Choice and Lifelong Learning' supports the experience I had at [my site] this week. In fact, I think his article is very supportive of what we are all doing by partaking in the internship program. He generally discusses the importance of individuals taking responsibility for the

exercise of their freedom and the choices they make; being locuses [sic] of their own success or failure (p 288). He states: "Education, training, and lifelong learning, as opportunities for self and professional development, become means for securing identity and investing in oneself and one's future." For all of us, I think stepping out of our comfort zones to better our education and increase our employment options is extremely valuable. I believe the experiences I will have at [my site] will increase my work ethic and efficiency for future jobs, and provide me with a number of situations that will boost my confidence in situations out of my comfort zone.

According to this intern, and similar to the other six, since she is making the right choices and is working hard constructing her biography correctly, she will "increase her employment options." Her education, and the internship specifically, allows her to craft a better self for "future jobs." She is appreciative of the internship as uncritical basic-skills training, permitting her to demonstrate her choice to work hard and be efficient.

Totally ignored by all seven was Bansel's critical theoretical analysis of choice, understood as both discourse and practice, located within multiple and relational networks. Overlooked by all was the previous lecture on how the discourse of choice is embedded in multiple other discourses of gender, race, class and ability that together constitute a repertoire or network constraining free choice. Forgotten was the video on consumer choice that critiqued the inequity between consumers and their ability to 'vote' through their market choices. All used Bansel to (re)produce a discourse of choice that valorized individualism and allowed them to earn a place within the world of work. Within this set of relations, aspects of social behavior were (re)thought along economic lines, interpreted "as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice" (Rose, 1999). Discourses of choice and freedom were, in this way, conflated as the interns crafted biographies to be exploited for their future employment options within a competitive market economy. Individualism and individual responsabilization veiled recognition of any other social-cultural relationships and determinants of those relationships. Marie, like the other six, described herself with private individualized values instead of recognizing herself as socially situated within, and/or critiquing the larger social-cultural context surrounding discourses of choice.

As Foucault (1977) observed, heightened individualism, which marks neoliberal systems, is registered in terms of individual freedoms, of individual autonomy and individualized choice. Within this discursive framing, the individualized subject of choice finds it difficult to imagine, and in this case actively ignores, those choices as being shaped by anything other than her/their own naturalized desire or her/their own rational calculations. To the extent that the individualized subject of choice understands itself as free, and the choices of others are seen as rationally and individually based, the visibility of the workings of power are significantly reduced and can be/were easily disregarded (Foucault, 1977; Marcus, 1986).

CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

Neoliberalism is the dominant discourse within New Zealand (Higgins & Nairn, 2006). Within this discourse, education is valued most for its ability to turn ideas/objects into things for the market, including turning students into better twenty-first century workers. University internships excel at producing these entrepreneurial subjects fitted for neoliberal workplaces. Indeed, when neoliberal values confront the ideals and critiques inherent within critical pedagogy, the resolution favors economic imperatives and choices. All advisers, both

site and academic, operate within institutions influenced by neoliberalism, and predominately accommodated and reproduced the rewards and constraints within that system. Even the critical theorists and left-leaning academics, who effectively critique neoliberal systems elsewhere, actively deferred to employers, acquiescing their oppositional stances. The interns, having grown up entirely within New Zealand's post-1984 era where choice and self-reliance de-emphasize structural constraints in the labor market and elsewhere (Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Peters, 1997) drew on those ingrained assumptions and actively ignored oppositional interpretations of themselves and their social locations. All participants reproduced neoliberal values. Alternative visions were muted, disregarded or ignored.

The power of neoliberalism silenced alternative orientations, naturalized and normalized the market ascendancy above and beyond other orientations. In describing the tensions between these contradictory perspectives, Isabelle Darmon states, "The nature and workability of these compromises very much depend on the relative strength of the institutional actors" (Darmon et al., 2006). It seems that participation in and accreditation through the B.A. does not necessarily produce more critical, more democratic, or more "emancipated" individuals. It seems as likely to (re)produce individuals who actively reaffirm and/or value their participation in a world of inequity and privilege. Indeed, the language of the marketplace reproduced within ARTS395 does not imagine or support an intellectually informed and politically disquieted student ready to grapple with challenges to the status quo. Instead, ARTS395 (re)produced students who saw knowledge and its value as a commodity to be acquired, to be hoarded and ultimately to be bartered in the marketplace of salaries and prestige. The pilot Bachelor of Arts Internship program did not succeed at instilling or raising awareness for the kind of social transformation envisioned by Dewey or Freire. Instead, participants reconfigured ARTS395 as basic skills training where interns honed their competitive edge in a neoliberal world.

A key challenge for educators interested in promoting transformative learning within WIL is to become aware of and utilize effective tools and techniques that foster critical self-reflection of ourselves and our students, reflective practices that are not merely individualized, self-referential and therapeutic, but are committed to and embedded within the social. Indeed, in the absence of larger cultural imperatives and social agendas designed to construct questioning agents who are capable of dissent and collective action, more specific critical pedagogical strategies are needed to develop graduates as engaged professionals committed to social justice.

To be productive, emancipatory education needs to transgress the boundaries of academia to engage with neoliberal ideals, providing real solutions which have real positive economic impacts. More research is needed into the theoretical assumptions of WIL, providing evidence of the transformative potential of education for a just and productive society. The research needs to be tactical and strategic, focused on the *how to's* of successfully including emancipatory education ideals and strategies within WIL, to provide productive critiques based on the tradition of emancipatory education. In order to negotiate the tensions between the promise of the university as the critic and conscience of society operating within neoliberal economic realities, more research is needed to supply detailed, specific methods of teaching that contribute to a broader project of imagining a post-neoliberal future.

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The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

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