Between compliance and contestation: 
the struggle for authenticity in university teaching and learning

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If the enquiring university is to provide a critical service to society, it must find ways to engage critically with the society it serves, and thereby serve the society is critiques (Rowland, 2006, pp.45)

Introduction

A much cited North American book with the title ‘The learning paradigm college’ (Tagg, 2003) discusses the need for institutions of higher education to ‘help students learn’, and encourage a deep approach to learning, and does so over 300 and some pages without a single reference to the larger purposes to which such learning may be directed. For the UK context, Malcolm and Zukas (2001) already noted the conceptual discontinuities between the literature in higher education that focuses on pedagogy and that which engages with the social and political role of higher education. Presumably, the author of the ‘Learning Paradigm’ felt that encouraging a deep approach to learning is a worthwhile goal in its own right. Surely, few would take issue with the claim that higher education should encourage deep learning (as linked to grand notions of critical scholarship and imagination) rather than surface learning—so what’s the problem?

On the one hand it could be argued that any discussion about the appropriate (degree of) depth of learning needs to be linked to the purposes towards which the learning is directed. More importantly, perhaps, one might observe that at a time when 1) higher education is increasingly called upon to provide a service to society by way of providing the educated labour to boost the country’s economic competitiveness, 2) institutions are ever more pressed to find alternative sources of income, and 3) students, the public and governments are calling for greater transparency in the functions of HE institutions, the larger purposes of higher education tend to be construed as instrumental rather than social (or even developmental and ‘critical’) in nature. The ‘learning paradigm’, which on the surface encourages ‘deep learning’, is inspired by a climate of audit and accountability that emphasises compliance and predictability at the expense of critique and imagination.

Ian Martin (2006) argues that ‘In the learning paradigm it is not clear what happens to the agency of the adult educator—the choices that are made, the causes espoused and sides taken’. I suggest that limiting discussions about learning in higher education exclusively to psychological constructs or processes, rather than including debate around the purposes to which learning is or should be put, undermines the authenticity, and professionalism, of educators, students and the university itself.

In this paper I take the view, as many colleagues have done before me, that an exclusively ‘psychologised’ view of the learning experience in higher education could be usefully enriched by applying also a sociological and a philosophical lens. A sociological lens would look at the context in which contemporary higher education takes place and the philosophical lens would explore the different conceptions of what higher education is for
and would seek to identify its larger social purpose (see for example, Barnett, 1992). These purposes, of course, are highly contested, as evidenced by diverse ideologies guiding teaching, learning and assessment, such as that of (1) Enterprise (‘to produce knowledge workers for the global economy’), (2) Traditionalism (‘to produce future researchers in the discipline’), (3) Progressivism (‘to encourage learning for its own sake and develop individuals to take deep approaches’) or (4) Social Re-constructionism (‘to make the world a better place’) (Trowler, 2006).

A philosophical lens also allows us to explore the concept of learning (and teaching) itself more fully, namely through the evocative notion of ‘authenticity’. There surely is something intriguing and compelling about the idea of ‘authenticity’ given that it captured the minds of European philosophers from Rousseau (1979) to Heidegger (1962), has been further explored by contemporary philosophers such as Bernard Williams (2004), Hubert Dreyfus (2000) and Charles Taylor (1991), underlies notions of genuine ‘caring’ (Noddings, 2003) and, more recently, has been recognised also by British and North American academics in adult and higher education (as well as organizational and school leadership) as a crucial concept in what it means to teach, learn and lead.

One goal of this paper is toanalyse the idea and meaning of authenticity in the context of adult and higher education in order to explore whether it is an ideal that educators, learners and institutions should seek to strive towards; the other is to explore some of the reasons that make such striving difficult.

The meaning of authenticity
Within the education literature, ‘authenticity’ is linked to notions such as intellectual autonomy (this is ‘autonomy’ in a sense of coming at things in one’s own way through critical dialogue with other voices rather than in the sense of ‘working in isolation from these other voices’), self-authorship and critical being (Barnett, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 1998) but also to an awareness of personal meaning and commitment to a larger purpose (see, for example, Chickering et al., 2006; Starratt, 2004; Tisdell, 2003; Hooks, 2005; Dillard, 2006). For the context of higher education Barnett (2006) proposed that ‘authenticity is perhaps the key concept within the deep structure of the idea of higher education, even though it is seldom evoked’ (pp.40).

Authenticity: a complex multifaceted concept
Charles Taylor (1991) argued that authenticity involves self-definition in dialogue around horizons of significance. But what are the horizons of significance (in this societal, political, economic context, in this present policy environment) that deeply matter to us with regards to higher education and the learning of students? Engaging with this very question, one might reasonably suggest, is part of the process of defining an authentic identity as teacher or educator. Perhaps hooks (2003) and Dillard (2006) describe their ‘horizon of significance’ as higher education educators when they identify the ultimate purpose of their academic educational work as ‘the practice of freedom’ and ‘service to humanity’. To be meaningful, to the underlying understanding, higher education needs to be directly linked to social purposes. Similarly, Taylor, Barr and Steele (2002) argue for a radical higher education that connects critical intellectual inquiry with those questions that matter most to humankind. The horizon of significance here is that not only individual students but society at large should benefit from the work and learning that goes on in the institution. The authors argue that

The academy must reach out in dialogue and partnership with the wider community….symbiotic partnerships need to be forged with social movements
that can provide dynamism, radicalism and relevance to the provision of the academy, and strengthen its connections with the socially vital parts of the wider society (pp.161).

But how is this view of higher education linked to ‘authenticity’? Is it ‘authentic’ because it is mine (that is, it is original and/or creative) or is it ‘authentic’ because it is perhaps in opposition to the prevailing culture of compliance that characterises the relationship between the university and the state? Or is this view linked to ‘authenticity’ because it involves and recognises other communities as equal partners in knowledge construction and thereby invites a continuous negotiation and construction of purpose? Or is it linked to what is considered ‘good’? These questions surely point to the multifaceted character of authenticity.

Inspired by Taylor (1991), Grimmet and Neufeld (1994) proposed that ‘professionalism’ in education requires educators to construct an authentic identity. Following the work of Thomas Sergiovanni (1992), they distinguish three types of motivation that may underlie what we do: to do what is rewarded; to do what is rewarding, and to do what is ‘good’. They further suggest that true professionalism can be observed when we are driven also by doing what is ‘good’, referring to that which is in the important interest of learners and wider society and, thereby, contributes to the common good. This, they argue, is an ‘authentic’ motivation. The link between the idea of authenticity and the ‘good life’ or ‘common good’ has also been emphasised by thinkers in the field of higher education. Nixon (2004) argues for a ‘pedagogy of recognition’ for which authenticity (through the virtuous dispositions of courage and compassion) is critical: ‘through courage I assert my own claims to recognition…; through compassion I assert the right of others to recognition’ … (Nixon, 2004, pp.123). Likewise Walker (2004), arguing for higher education to develop and nurture key ‘capabilities’ (Nussbaum, 2000) that promote the ‘good life’, further clarifies that these call for ‘an authentic recognition of the “other”’ (pp.140).

Based on a comparative review of some of the relevant educational and philosophical literature I argued elsewhere (Kreber et al., 2007) that in the context of teachers and teaching, authenticity involves:

- consistency between values and actions
  (e.g., Cranton and Carusetta, 2004; Chickering et al., 2006; Brookfield, 1990; Rogers, 1983)

- presentation of a genuine Self as teacher
  (e.g., Rogers, 1983; Cranton, 2001; Buber, 1958; Freire, 1971; Hooks, 2003; Dillard, 2006)

- being defined by oneself rather than by others’ expectation
  (e.g. Cranton, 2001; Tisdell, 2003)

- self-knowledge and confronting the truth about oneself
  (e.g., Cranton, 2001; Williams, 2004; Heidegger, 1962)

- care for students and promoting the ‘authenticity’ of others (leaping ahead rather than leaping in)
  (e.g., Noddings, 2003; Grimmet and Neufeld, 1994; Rogers, 1983; Buber, 1958; Freire, 1970; Cranton, 2001; Palmer, 1998; Heidegger, 1962; Rogers, 1983; Hooks, 2003; Dillard, 2006)

- care for the ‘subject’ and interest in engaging students with the subject around ideas that matter
- critically reflecting on how certain norms and practices have come about
  (e.g., Adorno, 2003; Cranton and Carusetta, 2004)

- care for what one’s life as a teacher is to be
  (e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Dillard, 2006)

- constructive developmental pedagogy emphasizing the dialogical character of the teaching–learning interaction
  (Baxter Magolda, 1998)

- self-definition in dialogue around horizons of significance
  (e.g., Taylor, 1991)

- making educational decisions and acting in ways that are in the important interest of students (and ultimately society)
  (e.g., Grimmet and Neufeld, 1994; Taylor, 1991; Hooks, 2003; Dillard, 2006)

It can be argued that what is ultimately in the important interest of society (and learners), is the achievement of learners’ sense of authenticity. Hence, there is a key role for higher education to help students to move towards greater authenticity. However, authenticity is also important on the part of educators, and institutions need to provide environments that allow for their authenticity to be gained. Implied in this argument is the classic understanding that educators have to be authentic themselves for their students to be authentic (Freire, 1971; Rogers, 1983).

Barnett (2004) argued that it ‘is one of the key pedagogical tasks, to enable students to understand the challenges, and demands, of becoming and sustaining an authenticity of self’ (pp. 202). Acknowledging that authenticity is also relevant with regards to educators, he continues that ‘Tutor and students are united, therefore, in a joint enterprise of mutual authenticity-making’ (pp. 202).

Barriers to authenticity

Barnett (2004) also observed that ‘students are not always accorded the space and the dignity in which they can be truly authentic’ (pp. 202). Nixon (2007), in an essay exploring the notion of academic excellence (university teaching, learning, research and service to the community) through the virtues of ‘truthfulness’, ‘respect’ and ‘authenticity’, suggested that

In striving for excellence, academic practitioners are necessarily striving for authenticity. Moreover, they are doing so under conditions of work which are often deeply alienating and inauthentic (pp. 22).

There are several aspects of the present higher education context that stand in the way of authenticity making it a struggle to move towards. One might mention, for example:

- a climate of accountability and performativity that emphasises predetermined learning outcomes

- concern over the economy, which manifests itself in the employability agenda and competition over alternative income streams (so-called internationalisation efforts are largely motivated by economic imperatives although internationalisation could be one way of linking the university more
closely with the needs of society (e.g., Kahane, in press; Kreber, in press)).

- staff development programmes that are largely oriented towards the ‘learning paradigm’ (Tagg, 2003) that emphasises psychological issues of learning at the expense of encouraging reflection and engagement with larger purposes of HE (thereby encouraging what Rowland (2001) referred to as ‘surface learning’ about teaching)

- increased specialisation or disciplinarity generally which minimises opportunities to engage in learning experiences that are characterised by dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, where participants develop the capacity to challenge the ideological positions and assumptions that underlie the different disciplinary perspectives they encounter.

Many observers feel a tension between the university’s intellectual, critical and theoretical purposes, and those that are practical, economic and service oriented; an ever-growing separation between preparing employability and intellectual inquiry, and a loss of the university’s social, intellectual and moral purpose. A decade ago, The Dearing Report (1997) highlighted the university’s role in teaching for democracy and so did the delegates of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998). More recently, Rowland (2006) draws attention to the tension within which the university functions: to comply and serve on the one hand and to contest and question knowledge on the other. The university’s commitment to enquiry works as a critical service within this tension (for example, diminishing the separation of rigorous intellectual inquiry from practical aims associated with the employability and skills agenda). As students and educators engage in enquiry they provide a critical service to society, thereby also contributing to democracy. The notion of enquiry and debate that is directed at promoting the common good (in the form of democracy and criticality) can also be understood as seeking authenticity in learning, teaching and the functions of the university. ‘The authentic university’, Barnett (2004) argued ‘can only be brought off through individuals within it acting authentically and being authentic. The authentic university…places significant responsibilities on each individual within it (emphasis added) (pp.207)

In the presentation, I discuss the difficulties associated with educators and learners working towards authenticity in a climate that is increasingly characterised by economic interests, competition and performativity, the latter largely interpreted as a requirement to demonstrate certain predefined and easily measurable outcomes or products (‘performances’).

Here I address just one aspect of these, the notion of pre-determined learning outcomes. Although written more than twenty year ago, Brookfield’s (1986) cogent critique of prespecified learning objectives in the context of programme development for adult learners still has much relevance today. According to Brookfield the predetermined objectives approach encourages reductionist thinking about learning that can ensue from education. With its emphasis on instrumental learning it neglects the domain of significant personal learning involved in reflecting on experiences and exploring the meanings others have given to similar experiences. For the context of higher education, we might add that the latter also involves reflecting on the alternative interpretive frameworks offered by different disciplinary traditions and how dialogue within as well as across the boundaries of these frameworks might lead to transformations and/or enrichments of our understanding of the critical issues and complex problems we encounter as individuals and as a society. All this is to say that prespecified performance-based objectives are problematic for learning contexts where processes such as deliberation, critical inquiry and contestation
(in fact critical being and authenticity) are to be encouraged.

**A struggle between compliance and contestation**

Choosing the path of authenticity, whether on the part of learners, educators or entire institutions, is not easy; yet it is through authenticity that learning, teaching, and the various functions of higher education institutions gain their larger meaning. Authenticity is a multidimensional concept, however, and within the scope of this paper could be discussed only in broad strokes. Authenticity is gained through critical reflection on the beliefs, conventions and practices that define how we understand ourselves in relation to certain aspects of the world around us. Higher education is in a tricky position in that its role is to serve society within the constraints it imposes and teach established knowledge (as it has been developed within the disciplines) (compliance) while at the same time it seeks to critique society and develop new forms of knowledge (contestation) (Rowland, 2006). Moving towards greater authenticity involves also a constant struggle between doing what is rewarded, rewarding and ‘good’.

**References**


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