

Critical Issues in Higher Education

CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE FUTURE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Volume 8

This series represents a forum for important issues that do and will affect how learning and teaching are thought about and practised. All educational venues and situations are undergoing change because of information and communications technology, globalization and paradigmatic shifts in determining what knowledge is valued. Our scope includes matters in primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as community-based informal circumstances. Important and significant differences between information and knowledge represent a departure from traditional educational offerings heightening the need for further and deeper understanding of the implications such opportunities have for influencing what happens in schools, colleges and universities around the globe. An inclusive approach helps attend to important current and future issues related to learners, teachers and the variety of cultures and venues in which educational efforts occur. We invite forward-looking contributions that reflect an international comparative perspective illustrating similarities and differences in situations, problems, solutions and outcomes.

Edited by

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Michael Kompf
and
Pamela M. Denicolo
2012

PREFACE

Although this book is written in our common language of English we continue to have differences in vocabulary use which may cause some confusion to readers. Some international readers might want to substitute the term ‘academic’ for ‘professor’ in what follows since the style professor is not universal for all academics in Europe but is, rather than a job designation, a title earned by only a few through peer review after some years of academic contribution. The terms ‘supervisor’ and ‘advisor’ both refer to the academic role of intellectual support for masters and doctoral students while the tome produced for fulfilment of a doctoral degree is a thesis in the UK and a dissertation in N. America. Similarly there are some concepts that differ between English speaking western nations: N. American readers might like to note that the concept of ‘tenure’ is no longer relevant in many European countries, particularly the UK, while European colleagues may be bemused by the term ‘collective agreements’ which refer to negotiated agreements between employers and unions. The chapter: *Doctorateness – an elusive concept?*, rehearses some other differences in policy and procedure, custom and practice between the UK and N. America in relation to higher degrees. No doubt readers will come across other differences to note in the rich tapestry that is global higher education.

INTRODUCTION

For many years we have been involved in the practises of higher education. Our experiences have included front line teaching, the thrills and threats of tenure and promotion and the transition into carrying administrative responsibilities. While our combined locations do not quite span the globe (Kompf- North America & Denicolo- UK & Europe) our activities and connections through world-wide organisations (e.g., the International Study Association on Teachers and Teaching- ISATT) have led to many interesting conversations about the similarities and differences between and among stakeholders that invested in the various institutions around the world that develop and deliver higher education.

Approaching such a topic as *Critical Issues in Higher Education* is problematic because of the gap between framing “critical” topics and time required for publication of such opinions and research. A near-daily drama of change in policies, practises and possibilities in higher education unfolds on the meeting grounds of increased demand for services, advances in and availability of information and communications technology (ICT) and the transition from largely publicly-funded organisations with *education for the sake of education* philosophy to organisations based on competitive commercialisation driven by multi-layered fiscal realisations and practises.

The thirty or so years of participation in and observation of higher education we can each claim has afforded a few life and professional life observations. History is important. The often cited adage that *failure to acknowledge the lessons of history leads to repetition* has only proved useful for predicting a limited range of socio-cultural circumstances as globalisation, population diversification and the growing strength of social justice movements have identified nearly infinite educational needs. However, in societies where the formalities of learning and teaching are in the early stages of development, lessons can be learned from those who have gone before and now face the positive or negative consequences of decisions or directions taken. Constraints of economics, culture, technology and geography no longer represent the challenges in the time before ICT.

Education and what it means has entered a new era in which the primary focus on *education for the sake of education* is strained. An educational free-for-all, in the sense of a no-holds-barred fight, seems in place as competition for market share, effective branding exercises and movement towards a client-based delivery of educational services (on demand as demanded) has been fuelled and confounded by litigation, accreditation, transfer credits and matters of patents, copyrights, ownership and monopoly. The link between education and financial well-being has co-opted as the key to personal success. Unfortunately, the degree pursuit, often called the “paper chase”, has become competitive for learners seeking scholarships,

awards and entry into graduate school. This transition indicates movement from *becoming well educated* to *employability potential* paralleling much institutional retooling and sustenance of enhanced reputation and fiscal viability.

Within these circumstances, learners still apply, are accepted into programs and study to degree completion. Professors still profess in accordance within whatever guidelines define the (un)certain boundaries of disciplines, institutions and governments. While the largest percentage of learners merge back into society in professional and other capacities, some persist and gain entry into the academy and the professoriate. These higher learners in higher education represent the next generation of the academy. Neil Postman's sentiment that "children are the living message we send to a time we will not see" applies no less to new scholars. The gradual raising of intellectual consciousness that hopefully accompanies advanced scholarship grows to appreciate not just the *what* of a topic but also the *why, how, when, where* and *what's next* aspects. Growth in understanding the terms and conditions of learning and teaching in higher education means developing a meta awareness of content, context and consequence in which academic ego-centrism is surpassed by critical thought, communication and social conscience.

Curriculum is not neutral, neither are learners, teachers or the societies that provide the *raison d'être* for education systems. We endorse the sentiment that teachers are best measured by their students and acknowledge the responsibility and privilege of working and growing with serious, dedicated scholars who feed and are fed by ideals of deeper inquiry and understanding of shared concerns.

The ideas and papers in this volume primarily showcase the work of a group of new scholars who will lead the next generation of educational practise and inquiry. While the topics explored are critical issues, the ways in which these new scholars have chosen to address them illustrates the diversity of voice, venue and value that has led them to present their work.

This volume is comprised of three main sections: Learners, Learning and Governance. Each section contains a brief overview of the topics covered. Our treatment of *Critical Issues in Higher Education* is not exhaustive nor was it intended to be and nor will it likely ever be. Passing days, months and years bring new challenges, bits of knowledge and ways of knowing. We will continue to provide a forum and opportunity for those new to the academy until it is time for them to not only share the gifts of insight and communication they have to assist bringing them to fruition in others with whom they have the great fortune to learn and grow.

SECTION 1

LEARNERS

OVERVIEW

This section begins with a chapter Social epistemology, higher education and cultural convergence by Michael Kompf that explores the course development that provided seeds for this volume. Social epistemology is addressed for the inclusive approach it provides in understanding the knowledge and ways of knowing that learners bring to higher education. Encouragement is given for further exploration of connections between current battles and debates over ownership and entitlement to use of materials in the entertainment industry and the messages, messengers and mediums that shape the production and delivery of educational services.

Andrew Short's contribution in Chapter Two Doctoral Students and Teaching in Higher Education asks if doctoral students should take a qualifying course in teaching in higher education as part of their studies. He explores this issue in terms of the relevance of such qualifications for doctoral students in education, teaching and faculties of education, teaching within the university, and the notion of occupation versus profession.

Chapter Three Developments in Doctoral Assessment in the United Kingdom contributed by Gill Clarke provides an overview of doctoral assessment in the UK in the 21st century supplemented with international comparisons. Clarke suggests that some of the influences have had an impact on doctoral assessment and the standards of research degrees as set out in key regulations and guidance that exist for doctoral education in the UK and elsewhere. She addresses the extent to which consistency of the doctoral assessment process can be expected, given the diversity and individuality of doctoral degrees, the way in which diversification of doctoral degree structure and content has affected assessment, and emphasises the common expectations of doctoral outcomes, irrespective of qualification and form of output.

Patrick Tierney's contribution in Chapter Four "Keeping The Boys At A Distance: An Alternate Path To Post-Secondary Education" provides insights into gender differences in the higher education demographic profile and suggest that distance learning may provide a key to addressing the gap that has been growing for many years.

Chapter Five "Preparing Researchers Of Tomorrow: Research Assistantships As Learning Venues For Postgraduate Students" contributed by Ewelina Kinga Niemczyk explores the issues and outcomes faced by postgraduate students as their careers begin to unfold and develop. She asserts that they are the next generation of researchers and scholars who will direct the future of universities and other workplace sectors and argues for the need to prepare them to become independent researchers.

In Chapter Six, Every Student Counts: Current Trends in Post-Secondary Student Retention Catharine O'Rourke addresses current trends that influence and guide best practices in student retention at the tertiary level in general and examines community college practices in particular.

MICHAEL KOMPF

1. SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY, HIGHER EDUCATION AND CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

OVERVIEW

The idea for this volume came from a graduate course I developed in the early 2000s first titled *Critical Issues in Higher Education* (later changed to *Contemporary Issues in Higher Education* as using “*Critical*” in the title was deemed a bit negative and overly dramatic).

Seeds of change in my thinking and eventual interest and orientation were sown in the late 1980s when Ivor Goodson (then at the University of Western Ontario) predicted a coming crisis for public education systems in general that would result in a focus on the terms and conditions of work, especially in higher education. During that era educational researchers in the professorate were still dealing with the shifts between and among quantitative and qualitative methods and methodologies that defined meaningful research on teachers and teaching and adjusting to using new lenses for examining others. It would take until around 2005 for academics to begin serious study and construct useful mirrors for reflection on professional and organizational practices in higher education.

During the intervening years the rise of equity movements and collective bargaining along with dramatic increases in enrolment demographics and fiscal spasms fostered social and cultural awareness and emergence of a Freire-type voice of educational conscientisation and social literacy. Self as person and professor, along with organizational directions and dynamics were no longer immune to, or ignorant of, deep examination of embedded assumptions, operational methods, approaches to learning and the socio-cultural-political aspects of education and educating.

The closest reflection seemed to be the required self-study for annual review or tenure and promotion and the periodic academic reviews for program accreditation or renewal. These measures while providing a “show and tell” measure of worth are, in a few venues, slowly accommodating more inclusive and expansive evaluation possibilities. Such review processes most often seemed to mix elements of effective display mostly addressing the required rubrics of review framed in ways that show those under review in the most favourable light given the organisational review rubric. The untold, unaddressed stories within of academic cultures, changing standards of valuation, evolving educational practices and curriculum delivery methods and a shift towards revenue-generating research and development combined with maintaining market share were and are seldom considered as factors in the quality of academic life.

M. KOMPFF

In time past, change in the academy occurred at glacial speed. That glacier seems to be melting much more quickly as educational crises and opportunities push change in response, rather than anticipation, of the globalising effect that has accompanied the explosion of information and communications technology.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

With the above perspectives as a backdrop, exploring the implications of such circumstances with students provided significant learning potential for all involved. For about 6 months prior to offering the course as a trial elective, I regularly scanned newspapers, magazines and other public information sources locally, regionally and internationally for articles that had or would have a bearing on what might be discussed regarding the practices and principles of higher education.

Topics found were diverse and included- but were not limited to: funding, special needs, information and communications technology, links between education and income, alternate curriculum delivery approaches, transfer credits, globalisation, library and reference resources, ethics, professional development in the academy, transitions from secondary to post-secondary education and more.

At the first class meeting with about 18 Master of Education students, I provided a pile of notations, newspaper clippings and magazine articles. Students each found a topic of interest that was important to them, and ideally connected with their current or anticipated research interests and professional life. Their first task was to dig into the topic and find other local, regional, national and international connections as explored, explained or excoriated in the popular media (newspapers, magazine, television, radio, internet etc.). The first assignment involved defining the issue, the various positions taken, identifying popular opinion and concern and projecting a *What's next* for the issue under examination. Supplemental reading materials were provided along the way intended to create a common conceptual vocabulary regarding the history, structure, function, purpose and value of higher education in globally comparative ways.

A second assignment involved tracking the issue through academic and professional literature to determine the scope and attention-worthy status of that topic for research and formal discussion. A final assignment involved developing a position that considered informal and formal perspectives, as well as information and knowledge claims all of which were shared in a class presentation.

Since first offering this course (it has now become part of the permanent academic calendar), I approach it with the guilty pleasure that comes with "teaching" a course in which I learn more than the students. Some of the contributions in this volume come from papers written by students with whom I have had the pleasure of learning. All shared what some might call a transformative experience from initially receiving permission to study the context in which they were studying, to the use of non-academic sources, and critically juxtaposing public knowledge with informed knowledge from the academy.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY, HIGHER EDUCATION AND CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

While background materials from philosophy, sociology and psychology did and do provide conceptual frameworks for grasping and discussing topics, it is the contextualisation of complementary or competing paradigms of practice or policy that seem to bring about shift and further understanding. Applying variant combinations and crossovers of inquiry models combined with personal curiosity and a growing sense of not only *need to know* but *need to know how to know* led to engagement with and enactment of an approach consistent with social epistemology.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND CRITICAL THINKING

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, social epistemology studies the social dimensions of knowledge or information. This field of study is divided on the constitution of knowledge, the scope social, and what methodological and investigative purposes might be used. Divisions reflect preferences for classical epistemology without its individualism versus a radical departure with social epistemology as a “successor discipline” that would replace epistemology as traditionally conceived.

Proponents ...seek to identify the social forces and influences responsible for knowledge production so conceived. Social epistemology is theoretically significant because of the central role of society in the knowledge-forming process. It also has practical importance because of its possible role in the redesign of information-related social institutions.

(Source: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-social/>)

The epistemological prototypes (Logical Positivism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory) taught in basic philosophy and research methods courses help scholars develop, understand and articulate a philosophical grounding in knowledge production. Problem formulation, measurement, interpretation and recognition of social contexts act as how-to signposts for matters awaiting some sort of investigation consistent with the ways of knowing invoked for the matter at hand. Departures from discipline-accepted methods and methodologies, while often contributing to paradigm shifts, sometimes act as career-limiting moves for early adopters.

In order to address the central form of inquiry posed by critical thinkers, locating issues with the *what* and *how* we know about them for meaningful and useful inquiry increasingly requires transcending the principles provided by the basic tenets of epistemological orientation in academic research. The main question for deep critical thinkers seems to be *So what?* When the *So What?* question is in play, responses are calibrated by the nature, intent and complexity of the exchange between the person(s) posing or addressing the question. Interrogations by one’s academic advisor, fellow student, relationship partner, parent or inquisitive child would receive answers scaled to grasp, interest and the likelihood of developing further meanings or deeper questions. An unfettered development of further meanings and deeper questions, whether sparked by utility or curiosity, represents

a personal epistemological process that may draw on traditional ways of knowing, alternative ways such as social epistemology or an idiosyncratic approach. Knowledge thus gained may or may not be intended for sharing or public display yet be important and meaningful for the knower. For example, information and knowledge acquisition increases when individuals or close others are diagnosed with learning disabilities or medical conditions. Information and knowledge gained increases understanding and may influence decision making in ways that relate to the veracity and verifiability of resources consulted further emphasizing the need for critical thought.

The sources of commonly-held knowledge are various and not necessarily confined to what might be provided by the standard kit of epistemological perspectives. Increasingly, opinions are produced and assumed to be of value in public forums often falling short of distinctions between information and knowledge. The crescendo question of traditional research is *What have I found?* Applying key questions in a social epistemological context might find them altered with an irreverent *So what?* question and *Who cares?* along with *What's next?*

The power for the production of knowledge, values, beliefs and opinions contained in public discourse has been the elephant in the epistemological room since the dawn of formalised discourse. Those who fall roughly into a framework of social critical theory have surrounded the concept of popular knowledge with ideas about how it develops, how it spreads, where it leads in ways that seem to go round and round.

Knowledge objects contain the seeds of inquiry. Any time any type of question is contemplated, posed and acted on, curiosity and creativity can lead to both clever and not so clever ways of investigation and outcome. Outcomes are the results of what science calls hypotheses and what psychology and education call constructs, schemas or paradigms. Transformation occurs in what is known, how it is known and where an investigated knowledge object might lead depending on the type and acuity of knowledge loops possessed by the would-be knower. Hypotheses, constructs, schemas and paradigms are put in play, evaluated for validity, reliability, generalisability and ultimately importance as determined by usefulness and the potential for development of meaning.

Individual formations of knowledge processes seem dulled by the one size fits all approach in conventional education irrespective of the academic level. That humans have survived for millennia is evidence of some measure of successful learning that has occurred as a result of experience and some form of knowledge sharing usually called teaching. Teaching and all associated activities are not neutral. That which is taught, those who teach, and those who learn represent a cumulative juxtaposition of encountered experiences and knowledge objects grounded in some type of educational ideal.

Educational ideals are enacted and communicated in various ways on a continuum ranging from formal circumstances to informal and incidental learning. Learning as it occurs naturally, outside of formalised circumstances, is seldom given great attention with the exceptions of deductive theorists like Piaget whose

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interpretations of cognitive development represented a creative overlay of paradigmatically consistent assumptions. So what?

The basic questions that surround how learning occurs in and of itself defies comprehensive accuracy because of learner and teacher individuality combined with social contexts and expectations. Think of the current practices of education as hypotheses that are continually evaluated by results. If we reached our goal all systematic and deliberate educational experiences would be successful.

Learning deficits programmatically addressed in many school systems may not be deficits of students but rather of the system in which they are enrolled as responses are limited regarding available resources, and philosophies, practices and policies that fail to reflect changing social needs for knowledge acquisition and application abilities.

KNOWLEDGE, KNOWING AND CHARACTER

The additive elements of character formation, socio-cultural connections, learning and interest preferences flesh out the values and aspirations that lead to action. Kelly (1955) addressed the impetus for action as *volition* rather than *motivation* as he felt that humans were motivated by simply being alive. *Volition* is ultimately buttressed by free choice and the power of will which may or may not be informed by social convention and consequence. The nature of free choice is best illustrated in one of Jean Paul Sartre's dilemmas in which thinkers are invited to consider "self as a judge" presiding over a murder trial in which a guilty verdict unequivocally results in the death penalty. The question asked is "When the jury returns a guilty verdict, what must you (the judge) do?" Sartre's response was that "we are condemned to be free". The judge can either comply with or reject the law of the land and face whatever consequences that might arise from her or his decision. Volition arises from the personal perceptions of free choice.

Humans are not only free to act as they choose, but enjoy often unacknowledged freedoms in belief systems and political circumstances among other perceived constraints. Understanding and acceptance of consequence en route to free choice is the pathway constructed by volition. The exercise of volition carries inner and outer responsibilities as choices must be made between individual and collective interests.

Hunter-gatherer societies, and many societies since those times, have placed the good and survival of the collective over the good and survival of the individual. Postmodern (and modern to some extent) placed the good of the individual in stark contrast to the good of society as societies have become constructions of *more* in many respects; liberal *versus* draconian, complacent *versus* aggressive, open *versus* insular, permissive *versus* restrictive and so on. Individuals in search of catalysts for volitional choices seem to publicly embrace dichotomies endorsing one pole or another and privately turn those dichotomies into continua of easements.

Relationship of self to society and culture aids and abets volition as conformity to social expectations can be limiting in terms of personal possibilities or rebelling against status quo. The formation of volition rests upon how individuals are fed,