The Student - as - Customer Metaphor: A Deconstruction Using Foucauldian Constructs

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Abstract

This paper examines the social impact of the 'student-as-customer' metaphor on the role of academic leadership and objectivity of the assessment process in the higher education sector. A hybrid approach is used in which Deconstruction seeks to render visible the Foucauldian constructs of power and privilege. The paper draws on the existing literature to explore the problematic relationship between the student as customer metaphor, academic leadership, and student assessment. The paper raises awareness of the inherent tensions with the present reliance on the student as customer metaphor and the resulting negative impact on both students and academic staff. This addresses a gap in the literature in regards to the effect that the use of the student-as- customer metaphor has on academic leadership and assessment in higher education.

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Introduction

Over the last twenty five years, political, technological and social changes have altered the face of higher education and academic leadership throughout the Western world (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). In Australia, government initiatives have been driven by cuts in public funding as well as the neo-conservative belief that education is a private good for which the user should pay (Biggs & Tang, 2007) leading to the politicization of higher education. These changes have transformed how Australian Universities compete for resources and competitive advantage. Australia's success as the world's third largest significant destination for foreign tertiary students is driven by quality and reputation (Universities Australia, 2013). As a result, the management approach of Australian universities has changed to reflect a corporate perspective with an emphasis on credit based curriculum, accountability and quality assurance (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In turn this emphasis on students has led to the adoption of the 'student-as-customer' metaphor in universities (Groccia, 1997; Bailey, 2000) with the focus on customer service practices based on the assumption that education is a resource which students seek to acquire and universities are the providers (Gross & Hogler, 2005). The quality and success of the service is captured by means of student evaluations of teaching, degree graduation rates and the Australian Government Graduate Survey. This approach to measuring quality reinforces and validates the metaphor that students are customers.

The focus of this study is on the use of the metaphor "student-as-customer" within the higher education sector. Metaphors can "mediate relationships of power and privilege in social interaction, institutions and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui & Joseph, 2005, p. 367). The process by which the metaphor has become legitimate is exposed in the literature pertaining to measuring quality in the higher education sector (Schwartzman, 1995; Gross & Hogler, 2005; Clayson & Hayley, 2005). The socio-historical conditions under which the processes are governed is exposed through the sub-text of the metaphor and the impact upon the leadership role of academics and outcomes that contradict the espoused benefits of quality management. A perspective for exposing contradictions and paradoxes of a metaphor is provided by deconstruction as espoused by Derrida (1976; 1978; 1988).

Metaphors are used to 'talk about something in terms of something else' and accordingly rely on evaluations, attitudes, values perspectives or beliefs (Cameron & Maslen, 2010). Cognitive research has identified that individuals think and communicate in terms of images created by metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and those metaphors guide an individual's subconscious thinking and reasoning (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). The importance of any metaphor is in its ability to create a cognitive framework for knowledge and a worldview, in effect it can induce onotolgical associations in the minds of individuals (Lakoff & Johnsons, 1980) without regards to any validity beyond the meaning conveyed by the metaphor.

Methodology

The approach employed in this paper may be described as a hybrid methodology in that it seeks to render visible the contradictions in the subtext of the metaphor through the lenses of deconstruction (Derrida, 1976; 1978; 1988) whilst exposing the existence of Foucauldian constructs of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1972; Fraser, 1989). Power/knowledge relations can be linguistically communicated by metaphors that become embedded in social practice (Foucault, 1980). This hybrid approach also shares some similar qualities with Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). The different forms of analysis applied to these dimensions are conveyed through interpretation and explanation which occurs in each of the contexts to reveal power structures, legitimation of ideologies and contradictions (Culler, 1987; Norris, 1985, 1988a, 1988b).

For the purpose of establishing the existence and extent to which the metaphor student-as-customer has been privileged within the higher education sector a review of the literature was conducted. To source relevant literature a number of key databases were searched, including ERIC and Pro Quest, using key search terms: "quality", "students as customers", "academic leadership" and "assessment". Each of these terms whilst addressed individually provide a consistent approach for determining the extent to which the metaphor has become embedded within the higher education sector.

Student-as-customer Metaphor

This concept of student-as-customers has evolved from the marketing literature in particular the seminal work of Kolter and Levy (1969). The concept was extended from a narrow view of application in commercial business into the broader sense of applying to all forms of organisations, such as churches, social agencies and government agencies (Kolter, 2005). From this position it was inevitable that management within universities would identify students as customers in the belief that education was analogous to the provision of a service in a business setting (Desai, Damewood & Jones, 2001). This paradigm shift had been referred to by Scott (1999) as the marketization of the education process.

A persuasive argument for the impetus of marketization is that the use of the student-as-customer metaphor can improve communication, increase employee morale and productivity, improve process efficiency, and reductions in defects and costs (Motwani & Kumar, 1997). According to Chung and Mc Larney (2000) this means that student needs must be catered for to develop effective educational programs and this in turn carries an expectation that Faculty staff will engage in continual improvement and customize educational experiences. Subsequently, use of this metaphor encourages teaching staff to improve and be responsible for the quality of their teaching (Zell, 2001). However, academic principles do not sit well with this metaphor and a number of concerns have been raised by both academic and general staff in Universities globally (Halbesleben & Wheller, 2009; Martin, 2008; Zell, 2001). The inseparable nature of services and consumer, necessitates the intimate involvement of students in the service provision creating a number of challenges and tensions (Chung & Mc Larney, 2000). Essentially, the concept of quality is problematic and relative to the perceptions of the different stakeholders

(Houston, 2007) while the implementation of business processes, such as quality management tend to reinforce control, reduce leadership discretion while focusing a narrow selection of stakeholders (Ulrich, 2001). Snyder (2007) argued that was a corrupting influence on the education process because it assumes that the students know what and how they should be taught. Clayson and Haley (2005) raised similar concerns through an analogy with the Enron scandal in which the accounting firm Arthur Andersen had treated the client as a customer. The point of the analogy being that this was a mistake and in the same way students are neither customers nor products but more like part of the educational experience (Schwartzman, 1995; Svensson & Wood, 2007).

The use of the 'student-as-customer' metaphor is used to trigger a subconscious response which taps into preconceived notions of 'the customer is always right' and 'customer focussed service', effectively changing the student faculty relationship (Scott, 1999). According to Chung and Mc Larney (2000) there is an implicit, hidden orientation in this metaphor that places the wants of the students as the central focus, around which the school revolves and according to Schwartzman (1995) this is not just semantics but leads to a change in the higher education culture. Foucault (1980) argued that our views of the world are constructed through social structures and practices associated with regimes of power where individuals may have some measure of creativity, which is limited by a regime of power. In this sense power is "a process that can be used to advance individuals and groups' goals, or to frustrate them" (Kabanoff, 1995, p. 6). Here the student as customer model has placed a greater emphasis on student involvement, and their voice, effectively empowering the students and in effect changing the balance of power.

Accepting that students are customers of the higher education sector is a philosophical stance that has been justified by arguing that they are consumers of the education that universities provide (Nicholls, Harris & Morgan, 1995; Groccia,1997; Driscoll & Wicks, 1998; Scott,1999; Pitman, 2000; Levidow, 2002; De Vita & Case, 2003; Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; White, 2007; McCulloch, 2009; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). An opposing view has been voiced in the literature (Hartley, 1995; Dillard & Tinker, 1996; Franz, 1998; Beatty, 2004; Gross & Hogler, 2005; Lomas, 2007; Svensson & Wood, 2007). However, once this view is accepted the next step has involved superimposing the theory regarding quality management. This assumes that education is equivalent to any other product and that consumers are influenced by the quality of the product. In the marketing discipline quality measurement is, for the most part, reliant upon consumer satisfaction. Thus the student-as-customer metaphor embodies three elements – the notion that education is a product which is accepted as justified by the economic literature – the relevance of quality management justified by the accepted of education as a product which is supported by the literature from a diversity of disciplines - and the subsequent means for assessing quality derived from the consumer behaviour literature inherent in the marketing discipline.

Quality context

Quality has become a global policy discourse, across private and public sectors, including education (Treleaven & Voola, 2008). To address quality issues in education, governments

and/or agencies within the U.K, Europe, U.S.A. and Australia have introduced quality reforms. In the case of Australian universities, the state and federal governments created the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2000 to conduct quality audits of all academic activities (Woodhouse, 2006) as well as meet the requirements of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2011). However, certain faculties and/or schools have chosen to seek accreditation from other bodies in an effort to gain competitive advantage to attract domestic and international students. This has been driven by a perception that the degree is a commodity and the customer is seeking assurance of the quality of the product (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This is evident in the growth of accreditation in business schools, particularly in Australia, the United States and Europe, where accreditation by bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), focus on quality outcomes such as assurance of learning (Treleaven & Voola, 2008).

The techniques and procedures espoused in the total quality management model were derived from literature enshrined in the disciplines of management, marketing, and accounting. The arguments for the student-as-customer metaphor have relied on the literature to claim that it is justified in order to achieve quality management with in the higher education sector (Williams, 1993; Eriksen, 1995; Owlia, 1996; Kanji, Malek & Tambi, 1999; Kanji, Tambi & Wallace, 1999; Hwarng & Teo, 2001; Brookes, 2003; Sirvanci, 2004; Tan & Kek, 2004; Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007; Houston, 2008; Hasan, Ilias & Rahman, 2009).

Whilst this push for the adoption of quality, modelled on Total Quality Management (TQM) has found favour with governments and university administrators as a means to operationalize continuous performance improvements, there are questions posed in the literature about the relevance of the quality philosophy in an educational setting. Scrabec (2000) argued that the TQM model assumes that a customer can be well defined however, in the educational setting this is problematic. There are a variety of other stakeholders such as parents and employers that can and do fit the definition of a customer. Thus to rely on the notion of the student-as-customer is an oversimplification of an otherwise complex set of relationships. According to Muncy (2008) employers and society itself have a stronger claim to being classified as customers whilst students are more appropriately the product of the education process. From this perspective the question about quality should be directed towards the quality of the graduating students – that is the product - coming out of the education process. Another view is that students are paying for a product that is an education, which hinges on a semantic difference between customer and consumer, whereby the former is more associated with one who pays (Redding, 2005). Regardless, of the semantics the underlying principles of the educational TQM model the argument remains that by empowering students to make their own decisions in the learning process, and somehow focusing on continuous improvement, students will be more satisfied with their learning experience (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008).

Use of this metaphor, with the image of consumerism, confers more power on the 'student customer' at the expense of other internal stakeholders, such as faculty and academic leaders, resulting in an imbalance of power and interests (Gross & Hogler, 2005).

According to Gross and Hogler (2005) when the student (as customer) is elevated to a privileged stakeholder, having purchased the services of the teaching staff, they demand that the academic, not them, should be responsible for their learning outcomes. Subsequently, poor results are not tolerated by students. When students do not get the grade they believe they deserve they exercise their power and displeasure through the process of appeal, and through teaching and unit evaluations where the teaching staff are blamed (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). Satisfaction from a student perspective is the attainment of grades that satisfy their desired outcome not some academic standard of learning and for this reason students interests play a more central role to the point where they marginalise other stakeholders (Krehbiel, McClure & Pratsini 1997; Rovenpor, 1995). In the situation where a University in the name of quality, focuses on customer satisfaction derived from students evaluations any negative evaluations can seriously affect an academic's career and prospects of promotion (Chung & Mc Larney, 2000). As a result, many academics feel forced to issue higher grades to students (Carlson & Fleisher, 2002), effectively 'inflating' the students' grade. Grade inflation is defined as "an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability" (Scanlan & Care, 2004, p. 475) and refers to the deterioration of the external validity of grades (Oleinik, 2009). Hassel and Lourey (2005) argue that the inflation of grades is a direct consequence of identifying the student- as- customer who believes they are entitled to a product (pass) they have purchased. This leads to a lowering of academic assessment standards undermining of the credibility of the university, the relevant degree, quality assurance, and enhanced student learning. This effectively strikes at the heart and purpose at both the University identity and academic leadership.

As a consequence of inflating grades (Eiszler, 2002; Zirkel, 1999; Basinger, 1997; Beaver, 1997; Lanning & Perkins, 1995; Goldman, 1985), academic leaders have undermined their own power and that of the institution (Zell, 2001). The student-as-customer metaphor is contributing to a social process that is altering the power relations in a faculty to the benefit of a particular interest group, specifically the students (Morley, 2001). Assessment is a form of hierarchical judgement where the students' disclosure is subject to the normalising gaze of the institution and its experts (Barrow, 2006), in order that the student "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). The gaze is now directed towards the institution and the academic leaders as a result of business related concerns of the faculty. With a focus on quality service, University management are sensitive to negative feedback from students who may eventually be alumni and potential donors; where success of programs are measured by market acceptance (i.e. positive student and alumni perception); and the prominence of business school rankings for attracting top students which are reliant on student evaluations (Gross & Hogler, 2005; Franz, 1998; Bayer, 1996).

Assessment and Academic Leadership

Consistent with the purpose of assessment, the use of the 'student-as-customer' metaphor, was intended to encourage academics to engage in continual improvement in order to improve service encounters (Yeo, 2008; Koch & Fisher, 1998). However, according to Gross and Hogler (2005) when institutions use the 'student-as-customer' metaphor the

teaching becomes less discretionary and more routine. While, faculty and administrators, fearing a drop in university rankings, enforce a range of rules and regulations pertaining to quality control issues affecting student satisfaction (Zell, 2001). As a direct result, these processes mediate the academic leaders' autonomy and expertise to ensure the students achieve the required learning outcomes (Bexley, 2013; Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009). Ramsden et. al. (2007) identified that teaching quality may be moderated by the perceptions of the academic environment which is partly determined by the academic leadership practices.

According to Zell (2001) students are not interested in their own intellectual pursuit but attend universities to advance their own careers or get a pay increase, desiring high results for little effort. Research (Clarke, 1982) reported finding that students most enjoy the teaching method from which they learn the least. Paradoxically, the quality of the product in education depends heavily on the hard work of the customer! With the focus on meeting the needs of the students to the exclusion of other stakeholders staff can no longer adequately fulfil the requirements of other aspects of the academic duties (Zell, 2001; Chung & McLarney, 2000). As a result, quality education becomes a cause of concern if the service is entirely driven by what the students want and ultimately define.

Research, cited by Hassel and Lourey (2005), found that on any given day 30% of students do not attend class as they do not believe lack of attendance will affect their grade. Essentially, use of the student-as-customer metaphor encourages students to develop an entitlement attitude (Harbesleben & Wheeler, 2008), high absenteeism, and a belief that 'good' classes are those that result in high grade for little effort, resulting in a lowering of academic standards (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). Students also expect a passing grade irrespective of the quality of the work submitted (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). When poor performance receives a pass the incentive to be motivated by grades is all but lost (Smith, 1997).

Hassell and Lourey (2005) reported that grade inflation was particularly pervasive at elite institutions where the customers have higher expectations, citing 91% of students at Harvard University graduated with honours. They posited that, if the direction grade inflation is taking at the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States is any indication, then the future of assessment in universities is bleak. In essence, pandering to 'student-as-customer' has effectively undermined academic leadership and negated the purposes of assessment which according to Boud (1990) should be concerned with accrediting the knowledge and performance of students. The literature is replete with research on the growing occurrence of grade inflation in the higher education sector (Eiszler, 2002; Zirkel, 1999; Bassinger, 1997; Goldman, 1995). Beaver (1997) identified the decline in academic standards as being the result of grade inflation, which Lanning and Perkins (1995) attributed to an educational philosophy that placed student's need for self-esteem and customer satisfaction ahead of assessing the level of learning. This failure to discriminate between the different learning levels of the students has contributed to what Goldman (1985) referred to as the betrayal on the part of the gate keepers in creating grade inflation.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the extent of grade inflation or the attempts to address student learning requirements that may compensate for the grade inflation the following comments are intended to provide an overview. The argument pertaining to grade inflation is basically considered to be due to a reduction in rigor in assessing students learning outcomes (Zimmerman, 2002) and this has been reflected in the average GPA scores (Tucker & Courts, 2010). Universities are concerned with student attrition or retention in Australia this is due to the financial penalties which have applied to the funding from the Federal Government. An interesting insight can be gained from the work of Tinto (2006) in which he identifies a notable change in the university sector from viewing the individual student as being responsible for his or her lack of persistence, in effect blaming the victim, to recognising that the environment in particular the university was responsible for the attrition. Hence the growth in support services especially for students in first year, which has become known as the first year experience phenomena. The universities have introduced a variety of support services ranging from pre-entry courses, peer-mentoring through to the use of a broad range of information technology. However, as Tinto (2006, p.2) noted "*substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by.*"

According to Schwartzman (1995) universities may be acquiescing to students' requests that are unrealistic, irrelevant, or not fully developed because "the customer is always right" and warns that this response may buy immediate satisfaction at the expense of the long-term best interests of the student and university. This approach provides a short term fix of instant gratification of consumer wants and does not facilitate long term quality education, nor does it consider that students are not the only customers (Redding, 2005).

In an attempt to provide quality education, the feedback mechanisms such as student evaluations, degree graduation rates and graduate exit surveys circumvent the intended outcome (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Delucchi & Smith, 1997). Whilst it is important to address the needs of the consumer, a service can only be effectively provided if the provider is true to their purpose or mission (Chung & Mc Larney, 2000). When a university embraces grade inflation (Baker, 1994; Lanning & Perkins, 1995), the assessment process fails to provide the appropriate checks and balances in terms of ensuring that the students have achieved the requisite level of knowledge. Australian Universities need to ensure they meet the regulations released by Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2011) requiring Universities to demonstrate that their graduates have the capabilities that are required for successful engagement in today's complex environment and higher education institutions to comply with teaching and learning standards. Further, the student as customer trend is resulting in 'truth in advertising' ligation against universities when students sue higher education institution for not receiving what was promised in their prospectus (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008).

Academic leadership has been undermined by the emphasis placed on meeting student- as-customer demands (Hartley, 1995; Dillard & Tinker, 1996; Franz, 1998; Newby, 1999; Bay & Daniel, 2001; Beatty, 2004; Gross & Hogler, 2005; Lomas, 2007; Svensson & Wood, 2007). This in turn has had a negative impact on job satisfaction and increased stress levels in the Australian higher education work force (Martin, 2008). This

is a concern for the higher education sector as longitudinal research (cited by Robbins, Judge, Millett & Waters-Marsh, 2008) produced by the Australian Government identified that job satisfaction for academics in Australian universities is dropping at a significant rate.

Summary

The student-as-customer metaphor derives legitimacy from the concept of providing a quality product or service as supported by the total quality management model. However, the underlying principle embedded in the total quality model is that there is only one category of "customer" not various possible customers with different needs to be satisfied. The marketing literature played a significant role in the early stage by espousing the virtues of treating students-as-customers within the higher education sector to the exclusion of all other stakeholders. Consistent with the marketing ideology expectations and perceptions of the customers are used to measure service quality and become a form of disciplinary power. Drawing from Foucault's notion of the gaze (1976, 1979) this has resulted in the academic leadership role becoming the subject of surveillance in effect disempowering the academic and empowering the student-as-customer.

Government departments and management in higher education institutions seized on the concept as a means to measure quality thus further legitimising the metaphor in turn academic staff and society were indoctrinated into accepting the view as if it was the undeniable truth. This has led to the subjectification of academics which in turn has eroded the role of academic leadership resulting in negative consequences. The most concerning being grade inflation which is due to the quality of higher education not being determined by educational outcomes but rather privileging student-as-customer satisfaction measures.

Future research may benefit the literature by examining the implications of the use of the student-as-customer metaphor in regards to the impact on teaching staff in the performance of their roles as academics, and the actual learning outcomes achieved by students. In addition, the claims pertaining to the provision of support facilities to improve the learning of students should be subjected to thorough and impartial testing as well research should examine the perception or attitudes in the market for graduates by the other category of customers, in particular employers.

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