An overview of research on student support: Helping students to achieve or achieving institutional targets? Nurture or De-Nature?

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Abstract

In the quasi-marketised environment of the new, mass HE, centralised policy continues to dictate conditions and traditionally stable sources of income are being made increasingly unreliable. An increasing emphasis on student support within HE institutions (HEIs) has been made necessary by targets for student numbers and the funding that rests on these. These tensions have been added to for 'post-1992' universities, by the Widening Participation initiative that brings with it particular issues around recruitment and retention. In this context, it is not surprising that the issue of student support has triggered a raft of research and scholarship geared towards providing technical solutions. This paper argues that before such solutions are fixed on, HEIs need to investigate the conceptual underpinning of such mechanisms.

Rather than focusing on the models and systems of support that are being developed in different HE settings and their effectiveness, the aim of this paper is to theorise the imperatives behind these, to look again at the context that informs their inception and how the various support structures position and identify students. Through this, the tensions that exist between financial incentives, 'bums on seats', Widening Participation and academic achievement rates will be explored.

Introduction: the context

In the current climate, the newfound emphasis on the retention of students in HE and interest in addressing the barriers to completion have the resonance of common sense. Quite apart from chiming with governmental considerations around the cost effectiveness of the (semi) public sector, there is a more teacherly concern that high drop out rates indicate that there is a mismatch between student expectations and abilities and the educational courses they are undertaking. One response to this is to investigate and devise support structures that seek to address these issues and provide technical solutions (e.g. Lawrence, 2004). In contrast, this paper will develop an analytical approach that originates from a Critical Theory perspective and as such, it will take a different starting point. To begin with, it will examine the context in which these common sense hegemonic concerns around retention have evolved. It will then go on to problematise and theorise the taken-for-granted relationships between HEIs and their students that underpin the technical solutions approach to this issue.

i) New Labour and HE

The much trumpeted 'Third Way' of New Labour at first glance appears to support the traditionally humanistic philosophy that underpins much public sector education. Third Wayism promotes the idea that the balance between the interests of capital and the human project of social justice and freedom is not nearly as tricky or as difficult to maintain as some (notably Critical) theorists have suggested. Indeed, Third Wayism

defends cultures of profit-making and capital investment, insisting that they are essential for human development. Third Wayism typically views State control and the operation of so-called markets as antithetical, privileging the latter as less inhibiting to what is perceived to be the prime motivator of human development: entrepreneurial activity and profit accumulation. Giddens – perhaps the most prominent champion of Third Wayism – goes so far as to attack Left wing thinkers for advocating state control of public provision, claiming that: “The state is as responsible for causing chaos as the market” and going on to propose that markets are preferable as tools for organising human development and public services. (Giddens 2000, p. 28-9)

Both policy strands (marketisation and social justice) can be seen as constituent parts of a globalised approach to education. According to Ball *inter alia* (2002, p. 12), the “commodification” of education involves the harnessing of education to the economic needs of UK plc and New Labour’s policy contributions in this area can be seen as descendants of attitudes first crystallised in Callaghan’s Great Debate speech of 1976 which insisted that educators needed to take more notice of the needs of industry and education needed to be shaped to meet those needs. Recent governmental concern – as expressed through NETTs and through the targets set as a result of these – is to raise overall standards of educational attainment as an insurance against the uncertainty of the global economy of the future.

The promotion and spread of marketisation in the public sector in England means that the use of quasi-markets to organise the local delivery of public services has taken on the qualities of hegemony. I mean this in the sense that markets have become ingrained features on the social landscape and to question their use is to invite ridicule and to be perceived as lunatic / heretical or in other ways detached from the ‘real’ world. In that sense then, markets have acquired the aura of orthodoxy and as instruments of policy they have been magically divested of political dimensions.

Superficially, the social justice component of Third Wayism appears to carry equal emphasis and thereby strike a balance between two competing interests. Third Wayism achieves this by proposing that economic development is a prerequisite of social justice and is therefore its agent. Thus, the Widening Participation agenda has been rolled forward specifically to promote inclusiveness in education as a way station on the route towards a society that has full social inclusion and economically productive citizens (DFES, 2003). Thus, the interests of capital and economic development are seen to be complemented by a policy initiative that addresses issues of social inclusion. For New Labour then, the market mechanism – in the case of HE, the HE quasi-market – is a starting point. An analysis of what this entails is developed in the next section.

ii) The HE Quasi-market

To start with then, what exactly is the HE quasi-market? The established definition of Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) is useful here. They coined the term “quasi-market” to describe the situation in which state monopolised provision is replaced by competition amongst independent providers. But this describes a context in very general terms. To develop the definition it is necessary to see quasi-markets as complex policy mechanisms that are often brought into being to achieve certain goals. In the HE context (as with Further Education (FE)), a number of key interlinked aims is discernable. The primary aim is that HEIs’ status as independent financial institutions is bolstered in order to facilitate market competition. Stemming from this, a second aim

is increased efficiency (through the imposition of targets and attachment of these to funding). Finally, and also linked, is the promotion of a financial culture that is entrepreneurial and that looks beyond public funds for its survival.

Ahier (2000) summarises these when he states that the HE quasi-market is “thought to make the producers of higher education more sensitive to a range of purchasers, and more efficient”. Providing further detail, he comments that the HE quasi-market also includes changes to:

“supply-side funding and demand-side funding. The former refers to the ways institutions have been given greater financial autonomy to compete in competitive markets for research funds and student fees. The latter includes two reforms. First, public funds are made to follow more closely the choices of users (thus gradually replacing the block grant system) and second, some of the costs are moved to the individual consumer, via cutbacks in grants and increases in tuition fees.” (Ahier 2000, p. 683)

This goes some way to describing the complexity of the HE quasi-market in terms of funding. It suggests the devolution of concerns around quality of provision and institutional accountability for financial performance. The competitive element suggests that there will be winners and losers; that some universities may successfully compete for research funds and fees and will market their “curriculum offer” more effectively in order to attract more students. Within the “demand-side” part of the equation, there is the notion that some HEIs may be more “responsive” to customer choice and may develop courses accordingly. Furthermore, the new system will put some responsibility for costs onto the student / consumer. Following from this, the pressures associated with the recruitment and retention of students are likely to result in the adoption of managerialist, input/output management practices within HEIs (for a checklist of managerialist attributes see (Randle and Brady, 1997). It should also be noted that the discourse of choice implies a fundamental transformation in the nature of the relationship between HEIs and their students: a discussion that is developed below.

Another aspect of the education quasi-market (and this may apply more to schools and FE colleges but has increasing resonance in HE) is that the terrain has a representational existence. Institutions, subject areas and issues related to policy initiatives are represented through policy documents and inspection reports as well as in the media. These representational texts may be produced by HEIs themselves (as in the case of a university website) or by external bodies (as in OFSTED reports of Teacher Training provision). These texts exist in the public sphere and together constitute an important aspect of the quasi-market. Some are produced because of the quasi-market and are, as such, interested (although this interestedness is usually marked by absence in the texts themselves); some may lay claims to objectivity and/or neutrality. Together these texts contribute to a textual ‘reality’, a corpus of data that will provide historical evidence in the future about the *quidditas* of HE (and education in general).

For any critical researcher studying such documents, this is a cause of great concern – mainly (and the pressure towards performativity is the issue here) because the distance between the picture presented by such texts and the on-the-ground ‘reality’ as it is expressed by the voices of participants, is so great. The interested nature of information in education quasi-markets is a fundamental shortcoming. While competition and choice are claimed to improve quality, this is undermined by a de-neutralisation of

information. Worryingly, governmental voices maintain a naïve or disingenuous perspective on the neutrality of such knowledge within the market place. For example, The White Paper: *The Future of Higher Education*, states that:

“The Government believes that student choice will be an increasingly important driver of teaching quality, as students choose the good-quality courses that will bring them respected and valuable qualifications and give them the higher-level skills that they will need during their working life. But student choice can only drive quality up successfully if it is underpinned by robust information – otherwise reputations will be built on perception rather than reality.” (DFES 2003, 4.1)

A decade of quasi-marketisation in FE demonstrates how market forces erode information making it far from “robust”. A plethora of cases (see for example, Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Crequer, 1996, 2004) provides examples of the misrepresentation of data – often funding related and frequently leading to financial crises and mass redundancies. What these cases demonstrate is that documents in the public domain (inspection reports included) do little more than testify to the triumph of performativity and the crisis in authentic relationships between educational institutions and the public that has been brought about by quasi-marketisation.

The sleight of hand behind the policy of quasi-markets (in education or any other part of the public sector) is that they purport to be a replacement for hands-on State intervention and control. The notion here is that these are environments that are independent and free of interference. In fact, this masks high levels of intervention and centralised tweaking. The quasi-market is a construct. It is not “natural” or “normal” and it is subject to having its conditions changed centrally at any time. One evident feature of the quasi-market is that it enables central government to push proper accountability down to a local level. While this may seem a reasonable step, it also enables government to sidestep wider and more general funding issues through the enhanced financial responsibility of individual institutions. The significance of funding cut-backs is dismissed through reference to the competitiveness and efficiency of individual institutions.

Another key feature of the HE quasi-market is the current away from an elitist model of HE towards mass HE. This was a process begun by the Further & Higher Education Act (1992) by which the old polytechnics became new (hereafter post-1992) universities. New Labour’s motivation to continue the drive to increase participation in HE is “essentially economic” (Ryan 2005, p. 89; DFES, 2003) and rests on the principle that a generally more qualified workforce will be more “productive”. While this assumption has been disputed (for example by Keep (1997) cited by Avis 2000, p. 33), to this end, in 2000 the government set up the Learning and Skills Council which was designed to achieve a “cultural revolution” (Fullick 2004, p. 3). As part of this revolution, a government target was set that 50% of all 18-30 year olds were to enter HE by 2010 (Leathwood & O’Connell 2003, p. 598).

According to the literature, the advent of mass HE has had the corollary of stratifying the HE quasi-market into “elitist”, pre 1992 and “mass”, post 1992 universities. Read *et al* (2003) suggest that this dichotomy reflects and indeed bolsters social and class divisions. For Ainley (2005), this division is further reified by the research status and monies accessed by pre-1992 universities. Other commentators develop this analysis

and identify that the status hierarchy between post and pre-1992 universities expresses itself through an academic/vocational binarism. Leathwood and O'Connell suggest that:

“the new student in higher education is often assumed to be on, and/or to want, vocational, work-related courses, in part because they are not considered to be sufficiently ‘academic’ for what are regarded as the more challenging and intellectually respected traditional courses.” (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003, p. 611).

The introduction of top-up fees is likely to exacerbate this division, benefiting students with families “with assets in the form of earnings, savings, investments, pension funds etc” (Ahier 2000, p. 692). Furthermore, the system of student loans is seen to privilege students “with positive attitudes to debt”, notably those from independent schools, those from the highest social classes and men” (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003, p. 608). Meanwhile, working class and ethnic minority students are likely to attend ‘post-1992 universities’ (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003, p. 598).

Ainley's commentary (Ainley 2005, p. 279) provides a powerful indictment of the impact of fees on students' attitudes to HE. He sees these becoming increasingly instrumentalist: “unless standards are related to prospects for employment, they tend to be rejected by necessarily increasingly instrumental students”, the knock-on effect being that, in the post-1992 universities at least, student demand is creating pressure towards more vocationally orientated HE courses. Interestingly, within this instrumentalist setting, employers are signal beneficiaries: “The situation suits employers very well as they are constantly oversupplied with certified if not qualified labour” (Ainley 2005, p. 278).

Before looking in more detail at student support and the student identities they imply, it is worth evaluating the progress made by the Widening Participation strategy.

iii) Widening Participation: the HE dichotomy

The Widening Participation initiative represents the social justice aspect of the New Labour's Third Way. According to Third Wayism, markets and social justice can co-exist and indeed complement each other. The idea then, that HE attracted and catered primarily for students from particular socio-economic and racial backgrounds has been addressed first (under the Conservative government), by the inception of post-1992 universities and secondly, by the Widening Participation initiative. It is important to register that the first of these strands provides the context for the second. How then has Third Wayism fared in striking and maintaining this balance between market and social justice imperatives?

Several important points arise from the literature. First is the sense that the effect of the initiative has been to increase rather than widen participation. According to Smith and Bocock (1999) the failure to remove the vocational/academic division in the qualifications framework (as proposed more recently by Tomlinson (HMSO 2005)) is partly responsible. Smith and Bocock, see Widening Participation as marginalised: responsibility for it being largely devolved down to the FE sector:

“increased participation from non-traditional students in post compulsory education and training encouraged by the emergence of new, non A level

qualifications routes (is) accommodated by evolving existing progression routes at the margins, particularly in FE” (Smith & Bocock 1999, p. 297).

Taylor’s (2005) commentary supports the analysis that the Widening Participation initiative has failed in its efforts to increase the participation of adults regarded as socially excluded / marginalised, instead increasing the numbers of students from middle class homes who attend university. He adds that “the institutional location of those who can be described as widening participation learners are predominantly in ‘lower status’ universities and colleges” (Taylor 2005, p. 111).

The initiative then has served to further cement the divisions between post-1992 universities and their more established competitors suggesting the entrenchment of social, economic and class divisions. Read *et al* (2003, p. 268) corroborate the influence of the market in this phenomenon when they suggest that “the status of institutions is being increasingly defined in terms of the profile of their student intake”.

Fullick (2004, p. 13) notes that the focus in HE has shifted away from adult returners and “quite definitely on (to) full time younger students who are in fact a minority in the HE student body and are likely to be even more so in the future”. Furthermore, commenting on *Success for All*, she foresees (p. 11) that the linking of “success” with funds “will risk creating a perverse incentive to narrow participation, by concentrating on those for whom learning presents the fewest challenges in order to improve retention rates”.

Widening participation in the White Paper *The Future of HE* is retagged “access” and has been made an integral part of the HE quasi-market overseen by an “Access Regulator”. The government’s approach to access in HE is interesting because it illustrates how the social justice aspect of Third Wayism is subsumed within market hegemony. In other words, Third Wayism is not about non-intervention in market mechanisms offset by heavy intervention in discrete areas to support social inclusion. Instead, social justice is positioned as a feature of the contrived education marketplace. The involvement of HEIs and other educational establishments is incentivised and, through the Access Agreement, “failure to increase the take up of university places from the most disadvantaged groups” (DFES 2003, 7.32) will result either in financial penalties or the removal of HEIs’ freedom to vary the graduate contribution. This demonstrates how Third Wayism uses funding mechanisms to realise principles of social justice.

This could be viewed as practical and pragmatic if the establishment of these mechanisms had any sense of permanence. However, there are a number of problems. One is that the achievement of funding driven targets has a by now historical record of leading to fabrication and bureaucratic entrepreneurialism in the FE context (see for example Shain and Gleeson, 1999; Crequer 1996, 2004). Secondly, and this again comes from the FE experience, these mechanisms are notoriously unstable. HEIs like FE colleges are aware that such mechanisms are put in place and then tweaked in response to practical considerations. This occurred in the FE quasi-market in the mid 1990s when the financial incentive for colleges to expand (the so-called Demand-Led Element) was removed when college expansion quickly used up the available pool of money. The removal of the DLE led to a cash clawback that had serious consequences for colleges that had set up provision on the understanding that the DLE would pay for

it. Government intervention then, is at one remove. If the HE quasi-market presents itself as a given environment, within which independent HEIs are free to compete, then Widening Participation is a contrived, tweakable feature of that quasi-market.

Student Identities in the HE quasi-market

i) Post-1992 HEIs and the ‘non-traditional student’

Looking at the issue of student support through the lens of this context reveals several contradictory pressures and clarifies some of the major issues. One contrived feature of the current HE quasi-market is the incentivisation of recruitment from “the most disadvantaged groups”. Despite this incentivisation, the literature signals that the post-1992 /pre-1992 dichotomy is likely to become entrenched. A significant theme in the literature supports this. This is the idea that ‘non-traditional’ students will gravitate towards post-1992 HEIs “in order to increase their chances of belonging” and to feel “comfortable” (Read *et al* 2003, p. 263). Read *et al* (2003, p. 268) posit the notion that a post-1992 university, like the example they researched, builds a reputation and an image which makes ‘non traditional’ students more likely to apply in order to experience a feeling of belonging rather than the potential alienation they might experience in what are perceived to be predominantly white, middle class (though more prestigious) universities.

This dichotomy becomes especially problematic when it comes to retention. The concept of ‘social support’ (Wilcox *et al* 2005, p. 707) amongst students and its importance for retention suggests that diverse student populations may be more vulnerable to the pressures that can lead to withdrawal which, in turn, means that post-1992 HEIs will have a structural disadvantage when it comes to retention as ‘non-traditional’ students are prevented from drawing on social networks of support in the same way as the ‘traditional’ students who outnumber them.

So, if ‘non-traditional’ students are gravitating towards post-1992 HEIs, what evidence is there, if any of how they are responding to this challenge? The literature maintains that apart from generating the label ‘non-traditional’, the HE sector as a whole has failed to respond to the influx of ‘new’ students. Read *et al* (2003, p. 272) in their study about ‘non-traditional’ students in HE found that, “for many, the choice of the ‘new’ university has not enabled them to fully ‘belong’ in the environment of academia”. Their respondents also had difficulties when encountering “the prevalent higher education discourse of students as ‘independent learners’” and the “lack of supervision” (p. 270).

Read *et al* theorise the experience of ‘non-traditional’ students in terms of alienation:

“(I)t can be seen that it is ‘non-traditional’ students who are most alienated by academic culture itself.... Academic culture both reflects and reinforces the dominant discourse of the student as white, middle-class and male.” (2003, p. 271)

Other commentators reinforce this thinking and see the model of the student that persists across the HE sector as congruent with an ideological construct familiar from New Labour policy documents:

“Within the recent policy discourses of the new Labour government.... learners (are) constructed as active consumers of educational services, taking responsibility for their own learning as independent, autonomous and self-

directed individuals. The ideal learner of such discourse continues to be based on masculinist conceptions of the individual, with this learner constructed as male, white, middle class and able-bodied, an autonomous individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt. Such conceptualisations are not only gendered, but also rooted in white Western cultural constructions of an independent self.” (Leathwood & O’Connell 2003, p. 599)

Ahier (2000, p. 684) affirms this model of the student normalised by policy into an “investor in the self conceived by human capital theory”. Under the new fee arrangements, the decision to accrue debt is more likely to be taken on by those “rational calculators” who plan ahead in terms of looking to their future financial prospects and this in itself imbricates with the modalities of social class, (and arguably) ethnic and gender identity, effectively favouring some students over others.

Lawrence sidesteps any sociological contextualisation of the issues by proposing a “deficit discourse shift” as a substitute for a deficit model of student identity. This approach “characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each with its own discourse or literacy. Students’ transition to the new culture is re-conceptualised as one of gaining familiarity, and ultimate mastery, of these discourses and literacies” (Lawrence 2005, p. 246).

Lawrence’s work is interesting but continues to represent education as a process of unidirectional transmission involving the mastery of static and monolithic agglomerations of knowledge and practices which she puts under the tag ‘discourses’. While she acknowledges that “(t)ransition is more difficult for those students whose capital may not be in tune with mainstream university discourses.... The Framework embraces the notion that each student, as they enter university, embodies their own socio-cultural, academic/linguistic and economic capital and these may not be in tune with university discourses” (p. 248), the answer for her is for teaching staff to “make explicit” these different discourses and expectations. The extent to which this approach can really be differentiated from a so-called student-deficit model seems unclear. While it moves away from a damaging personalisation of “deficit”, the close relationship between discourse and identity may have been overlooked.

ii) Other Identities: student as consumer and the ‘preferred student’

Another emergent student identity in the HE quasi-market is that of the consumer. This may manifest itself in a variety of ways. One is that there might be an expectation that payment for a course enhances and empowers claims for an entitlement to accreditation. Read *et al* (2005, p. 273) suggest that

“(S)tudents are beginning to utilise the discourse of ‘consumer rights’ to challenge dominant cultural academic practices that contribute to feelings of ‘alienation’.”

This emerging empowerment currently finds its answer in the perceived powerlessness of academic staff. Taylor and Bedford (2004, p. 390), commenting on a study from 1996, state that in that study “staff believed that remediation of students’ perceived deficiencies was the solution to managing student diversity in academic preparedness”. They point towards the emergence of a ‘deficit discourse’ of students within which a

‘sink or swim approach to non-completion is accepted’. This is corroborated by Lawrence:

“staff may label students who do not succeed or who have difficulties in mastering and demonstrating mainstream academic discourses as being under-prepared or intellectually deficient... Such staff may accept that it is the students’ responsibility if they fail – with staff perceiving that they have little role in and therefore little responsibility for, students’ engagement and perseverance in HE.” (Lawrence 2005, p. 245).

Furthermore, Taylor and Bedford (2004, p. 391) comment on the response of academics to support needs issues: “(N)on-completion is seen as a major issue facing staff, yet they appear to perceive it as an issue that is beyond their control”. The experience of staff in post-1992 HEIs is likely to be different from that of pre-1992 HEIs in this regard.

It seems likely that as the pre-1992 and post-1992 division becomes entrenched, support for students will be defined by this context. This empowerment of the student-as-consumer may emerge more forcefully in the pre-1992 HEI setting. It could have outcomes that are beneficial to both student and academy if it leads to a responsiveness on the part of HEIs and genuine attempts to adapt to the diverse needs of students. Certainly, it will make the issue of support (and the kind of support) all the more pressing. However, it seems probable that the response of HEIs (particularly those whose financial circumstances make them susceptible to managerialist cultures) will be of a technicist, remedial kind and that it will be incumbent on students to access a set of discrete support mechanisms. In managerialist settings, there will be a reluctance to provide for support through tutorial provision from academic staff. Instead, a major strategy for servicing achievement and retention targets will be the setting up of systematic student support. These may be bolt-on academic/study skills sessions, often with specialist support staff who may or may not have a direct link to the courses that the individual students are studying.

A corollary of the emergence of the student-as-consumer identity is that HEIs will increasingly look for students who can safely be recruited, retained and who can complete without drawing on any additional resources. Such students are likely to be accorded “preferred” status (Smith, 2007: forthcoming). Worryingly, the “preferred student” label maps across to the “traditional” student in bringing with her/him requisite skills, knowledge, background and financial circumstances to provide ‘a safe bet’ for the HEI when recruiting. In this formulation, the “preferred student” is contrasted with the “iffy student” – a student whose completion might be less certain, whose academic skills may be less well developed, whose recruitment in short might use more institutional resources or might affect completion rates. What is also worrying, is that the “iffy” characteristics designated by HEIs may in the longer term be seen to inhere in what within the Widening Participation discourse is identified as “non-traditional” traits.

It also should be registered that within the HE quasi-market, the “iffy” label will be dynamic: within a context of increasing financial pressures, any given HEI may strategically initiate a ‘bums on seats’ recruitment drive. In which circumstance, the “preferred” umbrella widens to include a broader range of student intake. The ‘bums on seats’ label is perhaps the least attractive student identity in the emergent HE quasi-

market. The extent to which it becomes dominant will again depend on local circumstances and the degree to which senior managers are able to keep financial and educational domains discrete.

Conclusions: Nurturing or de-naturing?

In this final section, in an attempt to theorise support I want to propose a continuum which at one extreme presents a technical solution (for example a distance learning module support package) and at the other a communicative response (a response that adopts a more holistic approach that supports the student not just academically but in terms of other issues that may be presenting barriers to achievement). A perspective derived from Critical Theory suggests that any approach to student support that does not address broader socio-economic factors external to the HEI, and their manifestation within the HEI, is not likely to be communicative (or successful).

The opposition I am proposing here draws on Habermasian theory. Communicative action takes place when acts of communication are: “coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1984, p. 286). Mutual understanding (Verständigung) forms the basis for action:

“(i)n communicative action participants are not primarily orientated to their own individual successes; they pursue their goals under the condition that they can harmonise their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions.” (p. 286)

Brookfield helpfully develops and contextualises the definition by locating it within a modern western social milieu:

“in a world full of different cultures, agendas and ideologies.... (l)ife keeps presenting situations to us in which we need to reach common agreement with other people.” (Brookfield 2005, p. 254)

Speech act theory underpins this idea, because communication of this kind presupposes meaningful and sincere interaction and the setting aside of other agendas. This might be projected as a conceptualisation of a supportive interaction between teacher and student. Meaningful, holistic support proceeds from a position that education contains constituent elements of nurturing. In other words, it belongs to the domain of human cultural interactions that should stand outside the world of commerce and commodification. In this sense, it is noticeable how the commodified roles of student-as-consumer and institution-as-product-provider undercut the authenticity of the relationship. As performativity suggests, quasi-marketisation potentially colonises the lifeworld of both student and teacher to the extent that disinterested communicative action may be jeopardised.

At the other end of the continuum, the metaphor of de-naturing attempts to signify the technicist response to student support, in which mechanistic, depersonalised and ‘off-the-shelf’ support products rather than necessarily meeting student need, fail to address them in a differentiated way and ultimately become technologies of compliance that instead ‘train’ students, attempting to manipulate them into ‘preferred’ modes of identity.

It must be overly simplistic to propose that any additional support provided by academic subject specialists to students experiencing difficulties on their modules is *ipso facto*

communicative, while any support mechanism that makes use of additional, non-academic staff is necessarily technical. HEIs may provide a gamut of discrete support features and, clearly, accessing these may meet student needs in a communicative way. However, the currently emerging HE context evidences the increasing spread of managerialist practices and it is this that will militate in favour of more 'efficient' and technical solutions that do not reduce the 'productivity' of academic staff.

As we have seen, the pressures of the HE quasi-market are likely to strengthen managerialist cultures that promote an input/output culture of provision. From this perspective, students are perceived in terms of income as long as they make no additional demands on resources. Any demands that are made of the institution on top of course provision are likely to be viewed as a further 'cost'. It is in this context that the twin notions of the "preferred" versus the "iffy" become useful. The dichotomous nature of the HE quasi-market suggests that as the unequal distribution of "non-traditional" students becomes normalised, it is the post-1992 HEIs that will bear the burden of these additional costs. Consequently, those same institutions are likely to become more managerialised than their pre-1992 counterparts.

Teachers in the middle

Although HE teachers may be working in a quasi-marketised environment in which students are reduced to 'bums on seats', and in which contractual changes and work pressures are increasing administrative duties while eroding professionalism (see FE), this doesn't necessarily mean they are adopting the hegemonic values of the structures they are working within. In other words, teachers may disagree completely with the instrumentalist view of HE that drives central policy even while they continue to work within institutions that are increasingly run according to those values.

To turn again to Habermasian theory, teachers finding themselves in this position may be operating according a rational view of their role and interventions with students, while being used to service technical rationalist interests of the institution that employs them. Here is the conundrum: while the best support (that students of traditional *or* 'non-traditional' background require) amounts to nurture and has a communicative dimension - in other words involves supportive contact with staff who can respond to their individual needs - and while university structures and roles and workloads increasingly militate against this as the model of the 'independent learner' is enshrined as a norm, teachers are still best placed to provide this. It is at the interface between students and staff that an adaptive response to the diversity that students bring with them can be most meaningfully expressed. The external machinery of support might be perceived as extraneous and peripheral, likely to point up inflexibility and to alienate students rather than anything else. Teacher/student relationships are where it is at.

In fact, the paradox is that it is the teachers who are 'in the middle'. While they struggle against cultures that objectify students and reduce them to customers and consumers of 'product' courses, and while their professional discretion is increasingly eroded, teachers still, through their efforts, prop up the very regime they oppose by supporting students at a human level. Their support is what produces achievement figures for the managerialist institution. Success and achievement are created by the efforts of teachers whose common culture flies in the face of instrumentalist views of education.

To resist the pressures that seek to establish and consolidate the template of the 'preferred' student is to challenge the nature and constitution of the HE academy. The usefulness of the nurture or de-nature antithesis lies in its insistence that not to nurture the students as they are is to demand that they conform to an alienating and ultimately self destructive educational experience. In effect, it is to make them complicit in the structures that are perpetuating inequality.

The critical moment in terms of the debate about student identities and the relationship of this to knowledge and education will come when the responsibility for the payment of tuition fees shifts from LEAs to individual students. This will consolidate an HE quasi-market in which 'value for money' has become an issue and the student as autonomous, calculating choice maker / consumer is further privileged. Supporters of education quasi-markets (and there *are* some outside the policymakers in government e.g. Tooley, 1996) will see this as a good thing, propped up by notions of customer service and entitlement. Universities, it will be argued, will have to sort their products out, ensure that they are offering what the paying customers want, that their provision is up to scratch. Despite studies into quasi-marketisation in the education sector that make the point that producers define the market, the proponents of quasi-markets will argue that the quality of courses will inevitably be driven up (See DfES, 2003).

These arguments about quality will have a depressingly familiar ring to them for colleagues working in FE or educational institutions that work fully within the private sector. The fundamental set of relationships that will be affected by the new tuition fee arrangements is that between students and teachers. The students as customers will increasingly relate to teachers as the mediators of "courses-as-products". According to this formula, teaching is inevitably reduced to 'delivery' and teachers potentially reduced to 'technicians' (Ball 1999, p. 7). If this debased educational relationship is allowed to take hold, whatever pro quasi-marketeers may claim, the disinterested nature of knowledge acquisition that has been at the heart of notions of State education since 1944 will have been undermined.

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