

Revisiting Dearing: Higher Education and the Construction of the 'Belabored' Self

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Abstract

Several authors have identified a 'therapeutic turn' in education in the UK, at all levels of the system. In this paper I focus on and develop this claim, specifically in relation to the Higher Education sector. I seek to do two things: First, I argue that the 'self' which is identified by commentators on the therapeutic turn needs to be reworked in the direction of McGee's idea of the 'belabored' self. This is because the therapeutic turn serves, I argue, a set of wider economic goals arising from the restructuring of capitalism which followed in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973 and the subsequent breakdown of the post-war (1939-1945) consensus around the purpose of public policy, of which education is an important part. Second, I revisit an important document in the history of the UK Higher Education sector: the National Committee of Inquiry Into Higher Education's 1997 report *Higher Education In The Learning Society* (known popularly as the Dearing Report, after its chair, Sir Ron Dearing). I argue that that the committee's ambition to bring about a learning society characterised by lifelong learning played an important and neglected part in bringing about the therapeutic turn in higher education in the UK. The project of creating a learning society characterised by lifelong learning, advocated by the Dearing Report, should properly be recognised as an exhortation to embark upon a lifetime of labouring upon the self.

Keywords: Higher education, lifelong learning, learning society, Dearing Report, therapeutic education, belabored self, diminished self.

Introduction

In a relatively short period of time – a period lasting little more than two decades – the Higher Education [HE] sector in the UK has undergone a process of restructuring. Driven by successive governments, and by successive policies and initiatives, universities in the UK have seen themselves recruited to, and reconstructed as agents of, an advanced form of capitalism. In this paper I hope to show that this restructuring of the HE sector has been achieved primarily by means of a *therapeutic turn* in the conceptualisation of education as such. I am not going to argue that the therapeutic turn has been used to *mask* the restructuring of education; on the contrary, successive policy documents have explicitly justified developments on the grounds that they are necessary to, for example, the future economic success of the UK. If we do not adapt to the demands of the knowledge economy or the information age, the argument runs, we will fall behind our competitors in the global marketplace and ultimately face economic ruin. If there is hegemony here, then, it is, as we shall see, in the insistence that such things as the knowledge economy or the information age have concrete existence, and as such that we must of necessity develop policies that meet their demands. My argument, in its broadest sense, concerns the ways in which the emergence of a therapeutic culture has shaped the strategies employed by successive governments as they have attempted to reconstitute Higher Education in the direction of the knowledge economy in the so-called information age.

In what follows, I will argue that the restructuring of the HE sector has involved primarily a reconceptualization of the student and his or her role in education. Moreover, this reconceptualization has been achieved in part through the therapeutic turn which has seen an increased emphasis on the student experience, signalled in part by the rhetoric of student-centred education, but also by the forced emphasis on universities as ‘learning institutions’ as opposed to teaching institutions. The idea that universities might be *educational* institutions involving *both* learning and teaching has increasingly been suppressed by these rhetorical strategies.

What has also been suppressed by these rhetorical strategies is the academic voice – increasingly constructed, not as a critical voice as such, but as oppositional to the student voice. As Ecclestone and Hayes note – and as we shall see below – ‘learning’ is a much more general activity than education, and one that ‘does not require a teacher’ at all (2009: 143). At the very least, professional educators have been increasingly encouraged to retreat into the background, not to teach but rather to facilitate student learning. In turn, these strategies have themselves been legitimised by an appeal to the existence of – or more usually the imperative to create – a learning society characterised by lifelong learning.

In this respect, I intend to argue in this paper that a pivotal role in establishing the therapeutic dimensions of Higher Education was played by the 1997 report of

the *National Committee Of Inquiry Into Higher Education* under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing, and published under the title *Higher Education in a Learning Society* [a.k.a. The Dearing Report]. This report is mostly remembered now for its willingness to challenge the principle of state funding of higher education, and for introducing the notion that students themselves should, at least in part, be responsible for funding their own education, via the introduction of student fees. What is all-too-frequently overlooked about this report is the extent to which it opened the way for the therapeutic turn in higher education.

Several commentators have written on the idea of a therapeutic turn in education (most notably Furedi 2009, and Ecclestone & Hayes 2009) and in this paper I wish to build on their work. However, I will argue that their conception of the ‘self’ which is the subject of this therapeutic turn is lacking in one important dimension, in that they fail to take sufficient account of the economic imperative which the therapeutic turn in higher education (as in education more generally) might be said to serve. I will argue that McGee’s conception of the ‘belabored’ self is a more potent idea in relation to developments in education than is the ‘emotional deficit’ model favoured by these writers. Before I turn to my discussion of the Dearing Report, therefore, I want to say something about the notion of the therapeutic society and of the ‘self’ which it both assumes and seeks to construct.

The Therapeutic Society

The development of the idea of a ‘therapeutic society’, or ‘therapy culture’ (Furedi 2004) or even of a ‘therapeutic state’ (Nolan 1998) is relatively recent. One of the first to use the term ‘therapeutic’ in this way was Christopher Lasch in his 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism*. (Rieff’s sociological work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* – originally published in 1966 – predates Lasch’s work by over a decade although, as Ecclestone and Hayes (2009: 125) point out, unlike Lasch and other writers concerned with the therapeutic society such as Nolan, Furedi, and McGee, Rieff does not attempt to discuss the impact of therapeutic culture on conceptions of the self). In this book, Lasch argued that the collapse in traditional frameworks of authority, such as religion, had left individuals bereft of stabilising moral frameworks, and had driven them inwards in a narcissistic search for self-realisation. As Lasch argues:

The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation... but for the feeling, a momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security’ (Lasch 1979: 7).

One does not need to accept Lasch’s psychoanalytic framing of the topic to accept that therapeutic vocabularies and interventions have continued, exponentially, to invade aspects not only of personal identity, but also popular culture. This latter is manifested by the explosion of lifestyle, confessional and reality TV programmes,

the burgeoning (and lucrative) self-help industry, and publishing phenomena such as that of the ‘misery memoir’ (or ‘cry-ography’) and the ‘Mind, Body, Spirit’ sections which now occupy substantial shelf-space in any bookshop. Therapeutic vocabularies and interventions have also invaded almost all aspects of public policy, including that of education (Furedi 2004; Ecclestone & Hayes 2009).

In an important sense, the therapeutic turn can be understood as a heightening of concern with the emotional aspects of the self. As Furedi notes:

These days, we live in a culture that takes emotions very seriously. In fact it takes them so seriously that virtually every challenge or misfortune that confronts people is represented as a direct threat to their emotional well-being. (Furedi 2004: 1)

Underpinning the therapeutic ethos, Furedi argues, is a *deficit* model of the emotions which assumes the vulnerability of the individual to ‘a bewildering variety of conditions and psychological illnesses’ (Furedi 2004: 4). This deficit model of the emotions leads to a conceptualisation of the self as ‘diminished’, which is to say that it is characterised by a ‘permanent consciousness of [its own] vulnerability’ which the individual is incapable of managing without ‘the continuous intervention of therapeutic expertise’ (Furedi 2004: 21). Therapeutic culture, Furedi argues, views the project of managing one’s emotions ‘as far too important to be left to the efforts of ordinary people’ (Furedi 2004: 34). On the contrary, ‘the management of life requires the continuous intervention of therapeutic expertise’ (Furedi 2004: 21).

Against this background, public policy – including that of education – must be redirected towards shoring up the emotional deficit of the individual. In broad education terms, this policy direction could be seen operating through such initiatives as the UK Government’s *Personal, Social, Health and Economic* [PSHE] programme, launched in 2000 and re-incarnated in 2005 by the Department for Education and Skills [DfES – subsequently the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)] as the ‘Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning’ [SEAL] programme (Ecclestone 2007). Based largely on the work of psychologist Daniel Goleman, best-selling author of popular psychological works such as *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Goleman 1995), the SEAL programme proposed:

... a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools’ (DCSF 2007: 4).

However, as critics have pointed out, rather than leading to self-fulfilment or self-realization, as is popularly thought to be the goal of therapeutic intervention, the therapeutic imperative instead cultivates ‘a permanent consciousness of vulnerability’ (Furedi 2004: 21). Rather than promoting self-fulfilment, the therapeutic imperative instead promotes ‘self-limitation’.

Building on the ideas put forward by Lasch, Nolan, Furedi and others, Ecclestone and Hayes argue that although there are both ethical and philosophical aspects underpinning the rise of the therapeutic ethos, the most important explanation of this rise is political. The diminished self, they argue, may represent a loss of human agency in its increased dependence upon emotional support, but the loss of human agency itself ‘reflects a historically specific end to any idea of the possibility of political change’ (Ecclestone & Hayes 2009: 140). The rise of the therapeutic ethos, they argue, is premised upon ‘the collapse of the human subject that occurred as a result of the end of the collective forms of working class organisation, in the form of the trade union movement, as well as of more radical projects’ (ibid.: 140). They conclude that, with the collapse of politics – especially following the collapse, in 1989, of the only real alternative to capitalism – therapeutic culture is given free rein to achieve its ‘strongest fulfilment’ (ibid: 141).

As an explanation of the rise of the therapeutic ethos, this is an interesting and important argument. But I would go further, in arguing that the political shift has its roots in wider economic developments. Indeed, I would argue that the therapeutic ethos is boosted, not so much by the collapse of communism and the alleged ‘triumph’ of capitalism – announced in such works as Fukuyama’s influential essay ‘The End of History?’ (1989) – but in the earlier restructuring of capitalism following the 1973 oil crisis. In the next section, I seek to develop this argument further, and specifically in relation to the fate of education in this process of restructuring. I will also seek to establish that this restructuring has implications for both the therapeutic turn in education, and the nature of the self that this turn assumes.

The Therapeutic Society: The Educational Context

It has been suggested that, at the turn of the millennium, lifelong learning in the context of a ‘learning society’ (or ‘knowledge society’) was ‘the dominant and organizing discourse in education and training policy’ in the UK (Green 2002: 612). However, the roots of this discourse go back much further, at least as far as 1976 when James Callaghan, then Prime Minister of a Labour Government, delivered a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, designed to spark a ‘National Debate’ on the future of education in the UK. In this speech, Callaghan made it clear that education policy would henceforth be viewed in some sense as part of the government’s wider economic policy. Education was no longer to be construed as simply equipping children ‘for a lively, constructive, place in society’ but would also now clearly serve another purpose: ‘to fit them to do a job of work’ (Callaghan 1976). For Callaghan, the education system fails if it produces ‘socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills’ required by prospective employers. These skills do not only comprise the basic tools of literacy, numeracy, respect for others, and so on, but also in-

clude developing ‘an appetite for further knowledge that will last a lifetime.’ Since 1976, these two key ideas – that education should, in some more-or-less explicit way, serve the interests of the economy and that the requirement for learning should be lifelong – have both moved to the centre-stage in debates and discussions concerning the meaning, function and purpose of higher education. As we shall see, they were also placed centre-stage in the Dearing Report.

That Callaghan should seek to open up a nationwide debate at precisely this point in time can be seen as a preliminary move in a wider process following the 1973 oil crisis and the perceived need on the part of Western governments generally to re-assess the post-war social-democratic consensus, and in particular the welfare state which was, in many respects, the object of that consensus. It has become something of an orthodoxy to point out that the oil crisis of 1973 (preceded, as it was, by the collapse of fixed exchange rates in 1971/1972 which led to currency destabilisation) did not just lead to the breakdown of the post-war consensus around the welfare state, but also engendered a fundamental restructuring of capitalism itself. We need not rehearse here all the various facets of this restructuring, but it is widely recognised (as in, say, Gamble 1988 and Castells 1996) that key features included a shift away from ‘Fordist’ mass production techniques characterised by a ‘one size fits all’ attitude to production, towards ‘flexible specialization’ targeted at niche rather than mass markets, and characterised by ‘just-in-time’ production processes and devolved, networked (i.e. ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptable’) organisational structures.

The argument runs that these processes, when coupled with rapidly developing and constantly changing information and communications technologies (ICTs), created the need for an educated workforce skilled in the use of ICTs, and exhibiting the key traits of flexibility and adaptability. This kind of thinking can clearly be seen informing education policy some twenty-odd years after Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech. As the UK’s Department of Education and Employment [DfEE] Green Paper – *The Learning Age* – noted in 1998: in order to ‘cope with rapid change’ initiated by ‘the challenge of the information and communication age’, the UK would need ‘a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force’ in which ‘lifelong learning’ and the ‘continuous development of skills, knowledge and understanding’ would be ‘essential for employability’ (DfEE 1998: 7, 11). This position was starkly restated in 2001 by the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown:

We want every young person to hear about business and enterprise in school, every college student to be made aware of the opportunities in business – and to start a business, every teacher to be able to communicate the virtues and potential of business and enterprise (Brown, cited in Mayr 2008: 27).

The closer alignment between education and the economy envisaged by Callaghan in 1976 had clearly become something of an orthodoxy by this time.

From the ‘Diminished Self’ to the ‘Belabored Self’

The self that is implied by this narrative is not obviously the diminished self as outlined by Furedi, Ecclestone and Hayes. There is, for example, no obvious place in the account of the educational subject implied by *The Learning Age* for the emotional deficit which Furedi, Ecclestone and Hayes argue is characteristic of the conception of the diminished self. But there is clearly a notion of the self as vulnerable in the face of rapid and relentless change. Consider the following passage from *The Learning Age*:

We are in a new age – the age of information and of global competition. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. The types of jobs we do have changed as have the industries in which we work and the skills they need... We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination (DfEE 1998: 9).

We see in this passage the presentation of a state of affairs – which presumably has come about as a result of the contingent policy decisions of governments, banks, corporations and so on – as necessary and therefore inescapable (Fairclough 2003). ‘We have no choice’ – both as individuals and, collectively, as a society – but to shape our attitudes and behaviour to this state of affairs. We cannot change the circumstances, and so we must change ourselves (Williams & Apperley 2009). The problem is that the circumstances themselves are understood, in the manner of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, to be in a state of constant flux (Furedi 2009: 25-26). Change is no longer conceptualised as a moment of upheaval between two relatively stable states of affairs, with the individual undergoing a no doubt stressful period of adjustment before settling down to the new normality. Instead, change itself now characterises the state of affairs, and individuals must constantly adapt themselves to the ceaselessly changing circumstances in which they find themselves, or risk losing out.

There is no doubt that such an environment, if it were actually to exist, would lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety and therefore feed the demand for therapeutic intervention. But the rhetoric of government policy – as we shall see in our discussion of the Dearing Report below – is about empowering individuals to cope with the ‘new age’ of constant flux, via ‘continuous education’ (or ‘life-long learning’) and the promotion of a regime of constant retraining and updating of skills in the form of ‘continuing professional development’ (Williams & Apperley 2009). Furedi claims that the self is progressively undermined (‘diminished’) by the recasting of ‘the ordinary troubles of life’ as forms of illness (Furedi 2004: 108) but the discourses around education work upon the conception of the self in a different way. To help us see how this works, it is useful to consider McGee’s idea of the ‘belabored’ self.

McGee’s starting point is the seemingly unstoppable growth of the ‘literatures of self-improvement’ amongst which she includes such works as Stephen R. Cov-

ey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, a book pitched not only at the self-help/self-improvement/self-actualization markets, but also at the business management (or business leadership) market. Covey's book – and others like it – link success in business (or, more generally, attaining one's 'goals') to the ability to change oneself for the better. In other words, success in one's professional and personal life depends upon the work that one does upon one's own character. The popularity of books such as Covey's (*Seven Habits* alone has sold over 15 million copies and has been translated into 38 languages) is, McGee suggests, in part to be explained by changes both in the nature of work and to patterns of employment in the wake of the restructuring of capitalism following the 1973 oil crisis. With rising unemployment, falling wages and the weakening of trade unions, amongst other developments, work has become less secure and more competitive and this, McGee suggests, has led to a state of affairs in which 'a sense of personal security is anomalous, while anxiety is the norm' (McGee 2005: 12).

The response to this anxiety has led individuals 'to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and constantly improve themselves.' As employment prospects become ever more precarious, workers feel 'compelled to constantly work on themselves to remain competitive in the labour market' (McGee 2005: 12). The self is, in this respect, 'belabored', which is to say that the work that is done upon the self is as important, and perhaps even more so, as the job one does (McGee 2005: 16). There is then Furedi's 'permanent sense of vulnerability' but rather than emphasising the importance of surrendering to the embrace of the therapeutic expert, McGee rather emphasises the way in which the management of vulnerability is made the responsibility of the individual, in whose own hands lies the ability to keep anxiety at bay. The individual can of course turn to therapeutic experts (such as Covey) for advice in dealing with the 'trauma' of vulnerability, but the decision to do so remains with the individual and not, in the first instance, with the therapeutic expert. It is in this respect that the illusion of 'self-help' resides, for as George Carlin has pointed out, if you turn to books for advice in dealing with vulnerability '[t]hat's not self-help, that's help' (Carlin, cited in McGee 2005: 11).

In emphasising the responsibility of the individual in managing his or her vulnerability, I do not mean to suggest that McGee's argument is incompatible with Furedi's. On the contrary, I would suggest that McGee's argument develops Furedi's in two important respects. First, in locating the expansion of the self-help industry in relation to the economic developments McGee provides an explanatory framework for the rise of Furedi's 'therapy culture.' As I have argued above, in relation to Ecclestone and Hayes' suggestive comments concerning the political context of therapeutic education, the 'belabored self' can be read as the economic face of therapy culture, its rise explicable in terms of the demands of capitalism in its post-1973 reconstruction.

This leads me to the second respect in which McGee's argument can be said to usefully elaborate on Furedi's: for the 'belabored self' is not only diminished emotionally, as Furedi suggests (though emotional problems might still arise) but also in terms of its social, cultural, and intellectual horizons. The belabored self is increasingly – and narcissistically – driven inward, not by Lasch's psychological forces, but by the material forces bearing on individuals under an advanced form of capitalism (McGee 2005: 16). The belabored self must ceaselessly, restlessly attend to itself, since the world it inhabits does not stand still. In this respect, the more appropriate Greek forebear is not Heraclitus, as Furedi claims, but rather the mythical character Sisyphus, doomed never to realise the full extent of his potential because every day he must start the previous day's task over again from scratch.

It is against this background that we might ask questions about the role of education in relation to the rise in therapeutic culture. The changing demands of capital, articulated in political terms via successive governments of whatever political complexion, will at some point be translated into policy. Governments will produce and seek to implement policies that serve the perceived needs of capital in order to sustain the economic fortunes of the country as a whole and in this task education policy is no exception. As we saw above, the 'key to success' in this 'new age... of information and global competition' will be 'the continuous education and development of the human mind' (DfEE 1998:9). The purpose of education must surely be to fit individuals for their roles as 'flexible' and 'adaptable' workers. In this context, the destabilising of the self identified by McGee, can be seen as a potential goal of the education system itself. The 'therapeutic turn' in education policy can be seen as part of this project.

In the following sections I want to explore this claim further via an examination of a key document – the Dearing Report of 1997 – in the shaping of current Higher Education policy in the United Kingdom.

Restructuring HE: The Dearing Report (1997)

When Prime Minister James Callaghan called for a 'National Debate' on education in 1976, there had been no substantial review of the HE sector in the UK since the Robbins Report in 1963. Meanwhile, the number of students attending university in the UK, which had been steadily increasing since the late 1960s, had begun to accelerate following the election, in 1979, of a Conservative government (under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) who saw an expansion in Higher Education as one potential means of tackling increased levels of unemployment. For example, between 1980 and 1990, students obtaining first degrees at UK universities increased from 68,150 to 77,163 (approximately a 13% increase). Between 1990 and 2000 the number rose from 77,163 to 243,246 (approximately a 215% increase) (House of Commons Library 2012).

This expansion in numbers, however, brought its own problems, not just in terms of the funding – at that time by the State – of increased numbers of students taking up the opportunity to study, but also of the running costs of the universities themselves, in terms of both staff, infrastructure and the introduction of the information and communications technologies (ICTs) increasingly required to deliver content. These problems became even more urgent following the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992 which saw around sixty degree-granting HE institutions (polytechnics, colleges and institutes) formally chartered as universities. With a dramatically expanded HE sector, it was inevitable that issues of cost would have to be addressed. It was also perhaps inevitable that Callaghan’s call for a national debate over the purposes of HE would finally be taken up: what were these universities – and higher education more generally – now for? What was not inevitable was the extent to which the HE sector would be aligned with the developing therapeutic culture, nor was it inevitable that this alignment would be driven through on the basis of the need to create a learning society characterised by lifelong learning.

In May of 1996 the then Conservative Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Gillian Shepherd, commissioned – with the full support of the main opposition parties – the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], which was to be chaired by Sir Ron Dearing. The Dearing committee was asked to ‘make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, size and structure of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next twenty years’ (NCIHE 1997: 3). The Dearing Report was published in July 1997, by which time the UK had undergone (in May 1997) a general election which had delivered a new Labour government under the stewardship of Anthony ‘Tony’ Blair. It has been pointed out that, unlike Robbins in 1963, Dearing’s key preoccupation was with the financing of higher education (Bennett 1997: 28) and it is true that the Dearing Report established the principle, which has since been entrenched even further, that as students are the main beneficiaries from their university education (for example, in terms of the higher wages that graduates command in the employment marketplace) it is right that they should contribute directly to that education, rather than indirectly via general taxation.

Of course, Dearing is not only remembered for introducing the idea that students should contribute financially to their own education and Dearing’s preoccupations were not solely financial. Reviewing the impact of the Dearing Report ten years after its publication, one commentator remarked that it had left ‘an enduring legacy, not only in terms of tuition fees, but also in terms of ‘access’ and ‘quality’ (Tysome 2007). At the time of its publication in 1997, the BBC identified five key themes which it claimed Dearing addressed. Apart from the issue of the funding of higher education, the BBC noted, the other four key themes included the widening of access to HE; the professionalization of teaching; the improvement of

quality and standards; and the impact of ‘the future’ (as in the increasing importance of information and communication technologies to the delivery of content) (BBC, 1997). Subsequent commentators have largely endorsed this assessment, more or less critically (e.g. Shattock, 1999). Although Dearing certainly addressed these various issues, one aspect of the Dearing Report – an aspect ironically flagged up in the title of the report: *Higher Education in a Learning Society* – is rarely discussed, or even mentioned. This is the Dearing committee’s attitude to the learning society, and to the associated idea of lifelong learning. I want to argue that it is this neglected aspect of the Dearing Report that has subsequently played a crucial role in facilitating the therapeutic turn in higher education in the UK.

Dearing, of course, did not invent the idea of the learning society, or that of lifelong learning. For example, the year prior to the publication of the Dearing Report – 1996 – had been designated the ‘European Year of Lifelong Learning’. In fact, it has been suggested that the idea of lifelong learning can be traced back some 70 years prior to Dearing (Green 2002: 612). By the 1970s a range of terms were in use (e.g. ‘recurrent education’, ‘continuing education’ and ‘lifelong education’) all of which would be decisively superseded by the term ‘lifelong learning’ during the early 1990s, following the publication of texts such as Van der Zee’s *The Learning Society* (1991), Ranson’s *Towards the Learning Society* (1994), the European Commission’s 1995 report *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*, and initiatives such as the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council’s *Learning Society Research Programme*, launched in 1996.

Green also notes the importance of the shift, at this time, from a focus on *education* and its context (i.e. educational institutions such as school, college, or university) to a focus on *learning* and its context (i.e. society as such) (Green 2002: 612). An important influence on the Conservative government’s thinking at this time was the Confederation of British Industry’s call for a ‘skills revolution’, initially proposed in 1989 and subsequently enshrined in the National Education and Training Targets for Foundation and Lifetime Learning, published in 1991 (CBI 1989, 1991). This document in turn underpinned the UK’s then Conservative government’s own proposal to turn the UK into ‘a learning society’ by 2000.

In the same year in which the Dearing committee began its deliberations two other key reports had been initiated, both of which identified the learning society and lifelong learning as key ideas. The first of these was the *National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning* [Chair: Bob Fryer] which published its report on *Learning for the Twenty-First Century* for the Department of Education and Employment [DfEE] in 1997. The second was the *Committee on Widening Participation in Further Education* [Chair: Helena Kennedy QC] whose report – *Learning Works* – was also published in 1997. Both reports had argued for the necessity for education policies at Further and Higher levels to take account of the existence of, or the need to create, a learning society. The Fryer re-

port, for example, had argued that if the UK was going to maintain its competitive edge in the global marketplace, it would need ‘to develop a new learning culture, a culture of lifelong learning.’ The recommendations of the Dearing committee were not therefore produced in a vacuum, but were formulated in the context of a wider legitimisation of the idea of a learning society, characterised by lifelong learning

The Dearing Report is clear concerning its ambition, not merely to respond to the demands of an already existing state of affairs, but instead to actively bring this state of affairs about. As the Introduction to the Report states:

Central to our *vision of the future* is a judgement that the United Kingdom (UK) will need to develop as a learning society. In that learning society, higher education will make a distinctive contribution [...] through its contribution to lifelong learning (Para 1.3, emphasis added).

This idea is stated even more succinctly in the Summary Report:

Over the next 20 years, the United Kingdom must create a society committed to learning throughout life (Paragraph 2).

In these quotations the Report makes clear the Committee’s ambitions, not simply to respond to an already existing state of affairs (though it does do this insofar as it sought, at that time, to address both the skills deficit identified by graduate employers and the crisis developing among universities over the funding of mass higher education) but also to engineer a state of affairs; to bring about nothing less than a change in the culture of higher education. The learning society – the key to future economic success – is not the ground upon which the Report was produced; it is the *goal* at which the Report aims. The learning society is a vision of the future, and restructuring higher education is the means by which this vision is to be made concrete.

Admittedly, the Report is not wholly consistent on this point. For example, paragraph 1.10 states that ‘the expansion of higher education in the last ten years has contributed greatly to the creation of a learning society’ suggesting that some progress had already been made. But the report also notes that this progress had been slow and partial, and that therefore ‘the UK must progress further and faster in the creation of such a society to sustain a competitive advantage’ (ibid.). As Hughes and Tight point out, discussions about the learning society have often been marked by a slippage between description and aspiration (cited in Ranson 1998: 184).

This restructuring of HE was largely to be achieved, I will argue, through two key ideas: (a) that HE should be student centred; and (b) that in a student centred educational environment learning should be prioritised over teaching, because learning is what students do. The unargued assumption that HE has traditionally been tutor centred, and that consequently teaching (which is supposedly what tutors do) has been prioritised over learning, haunts the entire report.

Engineering the Learning Society

The idea that there is a need to develop – or create – a learning society is interesting in itself. But what is even more interesting is that the Dearing Report contains a strategy for achieving this goal. Moreover, this strategy appears to make reflective practice – a key therapeutic idea – central to achieving this goal. This strategy for bringing about the learning society can clearly be seen in relation to Dearing’s recommendation that higher education should equip all students with four ‘Key Skills.’ Dearing reports that when consulted about which skills were most commonly lacking amongst graduates, and were therefore most urgently sought after by prospective employers, the Committee ‘did not find a consensus from employers on where the main deficiencies in skills lie’ (9.16). Nevertheless, the report sets out four ‘Key Skills’ which, in its judgement, ‘are relevant throughout life’ (9.18) and therefore should be common objectives of all HE programmes.

The first three skills – communication, numeracy, and the ability to use communications and information technology – are perhaps to be expected. It is the fourth ‘skill’ – ‘learning how to learn’ – that appears, at first glance, to be the oddity: are (or were) employers really crying out for graduates who have an understanding of, and an abiding interest in, their own individual pedagogies? This fourth ‘skill’ only really makes sense in the context of the assumptions underpinning the idea of a ‘learning society’ which frame the Terms of Reference of the report. Certainly, it is the only one of the four key skills whose presence the Dearing committee felt a need to explain, and this explanation is squarely couched in terms of the demands on individuals which the ‘learning society’ is supposedly going to make:

We include ‘learning how to learn’ as a key skill because of the importance we place on *creating a learning society* at a time when much specific knowledge will quickly become obsolete. Those leaving higher education will need to understand how to learn and how to manage their own learning, and recognise that the process continues throughout life (9.18, emphasis added).

[Note the phrase ‘those *leaving* higher education’, clearly pitching the learning society beyond HE itself, a point I will return to below.]

Learning how to learn is to be achieved, in part, by means of the student’s *Progress File*. (Dearing, Recommendation #20) As Dearing envisaged it, the Progress File was to comprise of ‘two major elements’:

an official record of achievement or transcript, provided by institutions [known as the ‘academic transcript’]

a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their own personal development [known as the ‘record of achievement’]

These two elements of the progress file – the *academic transcript* and the *record of achievement* (the latter now more commonly known as the *personal development portfolio*) – can be understood in terms of the product versus process distinction.

tion: the academic transcript was to represent the product or results of a student's studies, and was to be supplied by the student's university (albeit in a 'common format devised by institutions collectively'). The record of achievement on the other hand was to record the *process* of learning. However, it is worth exploring in a bit more detail the function of these documents, and the relationship between them.

The academic transcript, as Dearing envisages it, is to record the students' performance on the courses they take, and also what it is that their individual performances have earned for them: their degree title, for example, and the classification appropriate to the various grades they have earned in the course of their studies. It is, in essence, the document that records the student's engagement with their chosen academic subject, but also more generally with the university as an academic institution. Insofar as the student has demonstrated an ability to progress through the various levels of study, demonstrating a more-or-less successful grasp of subject-based knowledge along the way, the academic transcript acts as proof of that achievement, underpinned by the authority of the degree-granting institution of which the student is, or has been, a member. The document, and the achievement it records, is located squarely within the institutional confines of the higher education system, and it reflects and records academic achievement.

The record of achievement, on the other hand, is not about the student's academic achievements, but rather their personal development. This file 'would include material which demonstrated progress and achievement in key and other skills and recorded informal and work-based learning' (9.50). Whereas the scope of the academic transcript is clearly the period during which the student is studying at university and is concerned with the institutional context alone, the scope of the record of achievement is much broader: it is potentially the student's whole life:

The contents of the [record of achievement] would help students to review and record their past achievement, and encourage them to set targets and plan future development (9.48).

The focus here on the student's whole life rather than merely the three or so years spent within the institutional confines of the HE system is, I want to argue, crucial in opening the way for the introduction of therapeutic practices and therapeutic values – of self-help and personal empowerment – which have continued to shape the approach of universities to issues such as recruitment, retention and progression. It is in terms of the 'whole life' approach that McGee's idea of the belabored self becomes important, as we shall see.

To see how this works, we need first of all to acknowledge another of the ambitions at which Dearing aimed, for the progress file and its reflective element – the record of achievement – was conceived of by Dearing as part of a wider 'vision' of putting 'students at the centre of the process of learning and teaching' (NCIHE 1997: Summary, Para. 35). It is, I want to suggest, this student-centred

focus of the Dearing Report, coupled with the self-diagnostic nature of the record of achievement, which provides an important rationale for the subsequent introduction of therapeutic practices and policies within higher education as such.

Students at the Heart of the System

The title of this section is, in fact, the subtitle of the current UK coalition government's 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2011). Although not all aspects of the Dearing Report were successfully implemented, this is nevertheless clear evidence of its continuing importance in framing the approach of subsequent governments towards higher education. In what follows, we will consider the implications for higher education policy of Dearing's vision of putting students at the centre of learning and teaching. Putting students at the heart of the system (specifically in order to 'drive up the quality of higher education') was also a key principle of the influential 'Browne Report' (Browne 2010: 28).

Elaborating on the Dearing committee's recommendations in 2001, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] produced its *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* (QAA 2001). This document, which was intended to provide information and advice to those institutions seeking to roll out a version of the progress file, established 'Personal Development Portfolio' [PDP] (Dearing's 'record of achievement') as the preferred term for the student-driven element of the progress file, and set out a timescale for the implementation of the Dearing recommendation. HE institutions were to have agreed a common format for the presentation of data in the academic transcript element of the PF by the start of the 2002/2003 academic year, while the PDP element was to be implemented 'across the whole HE system and all HE awards by 2005/2006' (QAA 2001: Para 41). The QAA document suggested that, for the individual student, the PDP element of the PF would result in 'enhanced self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses and directions for change' (QAA 2001: Para 32). Moreover:

The process is intended to help individuals understand the value added through learning that is *above and beyond attainment in the subjects they have studied*. Crucially, it relates to their development *as a whole person* (QAA 2001: Para 32, emphases added).

As we have seen, the Dearing committee's 'vision' of a learning society underpinned by lifelong learning 'puts students at the centre of the learning *and teaching* process' (Para 8.4, emphasis added). The restructuring of HE in part takes its cue from this position. For example, the committee's 'vision' of a learning society 'places a premium on wider support and guidance for students' enabling them 'to focus their attention fully on their learning' (ibid.).

One might be tempted to interpret the previous quotation as meaning that students will be supported and guided so that they might better focus on learning

about their chosen subject, which is to say the subject (or subjects) they have opted to study whilst at university. But that is not what the quotation actually claims, for the support and guidance to be offered by their HE institution is not focussed on *what* they are learning, but rather on the activity of learning itself. Recall that ‘learning how to learn’ is included by the Committee as one of the four key skills which HE must ensure all students have upon graduation. Recall also that, in Dearing’s own words, ‘those leaving higher education will need to understand how to learn and how to manage their own learning’ if the learning society is to become a reality (1.18). This will be more important, the report declares, than subject-based knowledge, whether academic or vocational:

The pace of change in the work-place will require people to re-equip themselves, as *new knowledge* and *new skills* are needed for economies to compete, survive and prosper (1.12, emphases added).

Although subject-based knowledge is important, given ‘the pace of change’ it is increasingly redundant. As the report states: ‘In a period of discontinuous change, the future cannot be forecast from the past’ (Para 1.20). This is why ‘learning how to learn’ is so important. What students need is not increasingly redundant subject-based knowledge but rather ‘the knowledge and skills to control and manage their own working lives’ (ibid.). Students need self-knowledge – knowledge about their own strengths and weaknesses; knowledge about the various strategies for learning available to them and which suit them as individuals. It is this kind of knowledge – knowledge about the *self* – that the PDP element of the Progress File is intended to elicit. It is this kind of knowledge – and not subject-based knowledge – that the Dearing Report insists will help them to survive and prosper in the learning society (which, incidentally, these strategies, in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, are designed to bring about). If we accept the terms of this account of the relationship of students to their tutors, courses and universities, then what follows?

Centering Subjectivity; Decentering Subjects

One implication concerns the relative status of academics and students. Within the HE sector, academics may be understood as bearers of subject knowledge and as representatives of their respective subjects/disciplines. Academics retain, both as individuals (tutors, teachers, researchers) and collectively (as in a faculty, or a discipline), a great deal of subject-based knowledge – the kind of knowledge which the Dearing Report implies is increasingly marginal in a rapidly changing world. For some commentators, this ‘traditional’ conception of the academic/student relationship sees teaching ‘as a process which transmits pearls of wisdom from old scholars to new apprentices’, a process which is both pernicious and authoritarian (Elliot 1999: 13). For commentators such as Elliot, teaching should not be about transmitting ‘pearls of wisdom’ but should instead be about ‘support-

ing student learning’, a role that ‘is best carried out by directing the student’s attention to how they learn’ and not, presumably, to the academic subjects they wish to learn about (Elliot, 1999: 13). The student-as-learner is not conceived of as an institutional role, but rather as an existential state of being. As Elliot puts it:

Privileging teaching contexts over other forms of learning experience is a consequence of a formalised view of education that understates the extent to which students may take responsibility for their own learning and equally how much of that learning may take place outside of formal academic contexts (12).

In the learning society one does not become a learner upon entry to a HE institution, and one does not cease to be a learner upon graduation: one is always and everywhere a learner. Moreover, if the ‘traditional’ teacher-led model of education is (potentially, at any rate) authoritarian, then it must surely follow that shifting to a student-led model is both democratic (or at least anti-elitist) and empowering for the individual student. This empowering aspect of the student-led model is clearly signalled in the UK Labour Party’s contribution to Stewart Ranson’s 1998 collection *Inside the Learning Society*:

Individuals [in a learning society] need to be empowered to make their own decisions about their own lives. This requires not only a broad and balanced education but, even more importantly, that individuals are equipped with self-confidence and self-esteem (Labour Party, in Ranson 1998: 134).

It is not only in the emphasis on personal empowerment (one decides about one’s own life...) but also in the assumption that the goals of education cannot be achieved without first bolstering the individual learner’s self-confidence and self-esteem that we encounter, albeit in a gestural way, the ‘therapeutic turn’ in education.

As we noted earlier, this creates a potential problem for HE institutions, for if learning is a ‘life wide’ activity the need to actually attend a university might well diminish in importance. As Green points out, the European Commission’s 2001 *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* made precisely this point, arguing that lifelong learning should be ‘life wide’ in that it should be ‘embedded in all life contexts from the school to the workplace, the home and the community’ (Green 2002: 613). In the context of the UK, the point was made as early as 1994 by the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] prior to launching its *Learning Society Research Programme* (in 1996). The ESRC described the learning society as ‘one in which all citizens acquire a high quality *general* education’ (ESRC 1994: 2, emphasis added).

A similar point was made in *Learning Works*, the 1997 report of the Committee on Widening Participation in Further Education [Chair: Helena Kennedy QC]. In this report – a direct influence on the incoming Labour Government’s FE and HE policies, and on Dearing’s committee – states that:

Many of the skills and qualities required for success at work are the same as those required for success in personal, social and community terms... The capabilities are

learned and developed *in a wide variety of ways over a lifetime*' and the point is summarised in the phrase '[w]e believe that *all types of learning* are valuable (Kennedy, in Ranson 1998: 164, emphases added).

It is against this background that we might chart the increasing importance to HE institutions of attending to the student experience.

The student-centred approach of the Dearing Report, with its implication that the knowledge gained about his- or herself by an individual student is much more important to their long-term interests than any subject-based knowledge they might gain during their time in HE, has the potential effect of undermining, in the long run, the authority of the academic enterprise itself. After all, self-knowledge is something anyone can gain, whether or not they attend a university. Moreover, the very idea of lifelong learning implies that learning takes place continuously – in the workplace, on the street, in the home, in the pub – and higher education is just one more environment among these many others. Where, one might ask, does learning not take place in a learning society? And if learning does take place anywhere and everywhere and all of the time, what's so important about entering HE in order to do it? The status and authority of universities, and, of course, of teaching itself is thereby weakened by the general undermining of formal education in the face of informal and non-formal sources of knowledge, and by the emphasis on experiential learning over the acquisition of subject-knowledge (Furedi 2009: 157).

One way in which universities responded to this student-centred discourse was to bend in the direction of student experience. (In this can be seen one source of HE's current obsession with 'the student experience', as exemplified by such developments as the National Student Survey). An example drawn from my own university will illustrate the pervasiveness of this way of conceptualizing higher education. The Institute for Learning Enhancement [ILE] at the University of Wolverhampton has its origins in the Dearing Report's desire to enhance the quality of HE via the 'professionalization' of the sector. Part of this project involved the setting up of an independent body charged with maintaining and improving standards in HE. This body was the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education [ILTHE] which, in 2004, became the Higher Education Academy [HEA]. The role of the HEA in promoting a therapeutic culture in universities has been noted by Ecclestone and Hayes (2009: 99).

The ILE – formerly known as the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching [CELT] – describes itself as 'a strategic department established to lead developments in learning and teaching across the University.' However, in spite of this reference to learning *and* teaching, it is significant that the renamed body dropped the original reference to teaching altogether in favour of the student-centred formulation 'learning enhancement.' This emphasis is reinforced in the ILE's Mission Statement, which makes no reference to teaching at all:

We are committed to promoting independence in our learners, developing their intellectual capacities, enhancing their key and research skills, and improving their subject knowledge (ILE n.d.).

The ILE provides a series of guides to lecturers including, amongst others, ‘How to harness the students’ experience to their learning,’ the purpose of which is to make their learning ‘meaningful and relevant’ to their lives, and ‘How to raise attainment with a good assignment brief.’ This latter contains the following statement:

Research shows that attainment levels can be associated with the quality of the assignment brief; students report that unclear and unwieldy briefs produce learner anxiety; students spend days trying to decode the brief rather than getting down to the assignment (ILE n.d.).

Here we encounter the therapeutic turn in advice on constructing an assignment brief, for the point of producing a clear brief is the reduction of learner anxiety. Not only is no evidence supplied for this claim (in spite of the claims that ‘[r]esearch shows’ or that ‘students report’) but one is also led to wonder how a tutor should respond to this advice more generally. For example, asking students to read complex and difficult texts would no doubt have the effect of increasing ‘learner anxiety’. Should tutors, therefore, find simpler, less complex texts?

Elsewhere in the University, the therapeutic orthodoxy promoted by, at the national level, the HEA and, at the local level, by the ILE is endorsed and promoted. In the University’s School of Education, for example, researchers focus on ‘emotional reactions to learning and assessment’ and explore the ‘corrosive emotional reactions’ suffered by students faced with challenging assessments which pervade their personal and working lives ‘like an illness’ (Cramp et al. 2011: 519). As I have sought to demonstrate, Dearing’s emphasis on the student experience, and the elevation of process (via the record of achievement – or personal development portfolio – element of the Progress File) over product (the academic transcript) sets this process in train.

From Personal Development to Working on the Self

We have seen that the Dearing Report identified the creation of a culture of life-long learning as a key goal to which higher education might be recruited. We have also considered the role which the personal development portfolio, with its emphasis on the importance to students of reflecting upon their whole lives, was to play in establishing a culture of lifelong learning. But as critics of this policy have pointed out, reflection is not a simple thing and the students’ ability to do it might be affected by their gender, race, or class, and might to some extent even be affected by the academic subjects which they choose to study. Clegg and Bradley, for example, point out that students taking ‘hard’ subjects such as engineering see technical matters or the ‘facticity’ of their subjects as much more germane to their

studies than ‘soft’ practices such as reflection, whereas in ‘soft’ subjects, such as one finds in the humanities, reflection is already part of what students do. Ironically, downplaying the subject-knowledge in these latter subjects in favour of ‘directing the student’s attention to how they learn’ (Elliot 1999: 13) might well undermine a more sophisticated ability to reflect (Clegg & Bradley 2006: 70-71).

If the personal growth of the student were genuinely the goal of the personal development portfolio, such considerations might be cause for concern. But as we have already seen, the purpose of the reflective element of Dearing’s Progress File is not the personal growth of the individual student: it is the creation of a culture of lifelong learning. Couched in the language of therapy – education will produce ‘socially well-adjusted members of society’ [Callaghan] – students will be ‘empowered to make their own decisions about their own lives’ and to ‘manage their own learning’ [Labour Party; Dearing]; they will be encouraged to ‘reflect upon their own personal development’ [Dearing]; the process of reflection will help students to develop ‘as a whole person’ [QAA]; students must be enabled to ‘take responsibility for their own learning’ [Elliot]; students must be ‘equipped with self-confidence and self-esteem’ [Labour Party]) the goal of creating a culture of lifelong learning is to align more closely the system of higher education (and education more generally) to the needs of the economy, and in particular the demands on the part of business for a more flexible and adaptable workforce.

Although Dearing acknowledges – in the very first line of the very first paragraph of the report – that ‘education is life-enhancing’ in that ‘it contributes to the whole quality of life’ this is mere lip-service, for in the very next line of the report the dominant tone is set: ‘In the next century, the economically successful nations *will be those that become learning societies*: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning’ (Para 1.1, emphasis added). Education generally, and higher education in particular, is yoked to the goal of economic success at the outset. The task of education thus shifts from the enlightenment goal of enlarging the human being in its understanding of the world, to shrinking its understanding to a set of narrow economic goals, chief amongst which is the work one must do upon one’s self. In this new post-Fordist world, labouring upon oneself is ‘the key to success’ and is ‘essential to employability’ (DEE 1998: 9, 7). As Clegg, writing in the wake of the Dearing Report, has pointed out, the subjectivities of students have been reconstructed in that they have been encouraged to see themselves, not primarily as learners interested in their subjects, but as learners interested in themselves as learners – via the ‘learning-to-learn’ discourse – or as employable subjects oriented towards work – via the currently fashionable ‘employability’ discourse (Clegg 2004; Ball 2009; Browne 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that, in terms of the therapeutic turn in the UK higher education sector, the Dearing Report has played a crucial but often overlooked role. It's ambition to bring about a learning society characterised by lifelong learning, necessitating as this did a cultural shift in our understanding of the purpose and point of higher education, framed the committee's approach in ways that decisively shifted the centre of gravity towards the student-as-learner, a role no longer constrained by the limited institutional confines of the university characterised by a focus on academic subjects. This new role, cut loose from the institutional constraints of the university, implies a self that must constantly labour upon itself if it is to succeed in the new speeded-up, flexible labour market. The project of reflexivity which Dearing establishes via the record of achievement element of the Progress File is 'characterised by the constant need to invent the self in the face of risk [and] the lack of old certainties and stable social relations' which this new capitalist order demands (Clegg & David 2006: 155). This 'belabored' self is the product of the therapeutic turn set in train by the Dearing Report, and subsequently refined and consolidated across the HE sector in the UK.

Of course, I do not claim that Dearing was solely the agent of this therapeutic turn in HE – it was a symptom just as much as a cause, as I hope I have gone some way towards demonstrating. Nor do I claim that it is solely the student-centred aspects of the report that led to this therapeutic turn. Ecclestone and Hayes, for example, point out that Dearing's ambition to 'professionalise' teaching in the HE sector via the establishment of a professional body (Dearing led to the setting up of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education which has since been superseded by the Higher Education Academy) has also had an important impact on entrenching the therapeutic culture in academia via its role in teacher training (Ecclestone & Hayes 2009: 99). But I do think that Dearing's role in bringing about the therapeutic turn ought to be properly recognised and understood. The project of creating a learning society characterised by lifelong learning, advocated by the Dearing Report, should properly be recognised as an exhortation to embark upon a lifetime of labouring upon the self.

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