# Student Satisfaction Negates Pedagogic Rights, Theirs and Ours!

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**Research Article**

# Student Satisfaction Negates Pedagogic Rights, Theirs and Ours!

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Abstract

This article outlines how the potential for students to be co-participants, via a critical education, risks being further co-opted through the marketization of higher education by constructing students as consumers with power over academics to make judgments on pedagogic quality through student satisfaction ratings. We start by outlining the relevant components of marketization processes, and their associated practices of financialization and managerialism that have developed in response to the 'legitimation crisis' in higher education and argue that these have profoundly altered the university landscape with a significant impact on our working practices. Student engagement is increasingly being appropriated as a quantifiable measurement of 'student satisfaction', which then profoundly alters the teaching and learning experience with different understandings of what acquiring knowledge requires and what it feels like. We draw on our experience of working in the post-1992 sector to describe how we are increasingly working under conditions of 'reified exchange' and how this affects our relationships with students, other academics and management, eroding our pedagogic rights and theirs in the process. Specifically, we conclude that marketization is likely to further reduce the institutional space and opportunities for both lecturers and students to exercise their 'pedagogic rights' to personal enhancement, social inclusion and civic participation through education.

## Introduction

This article outlines how the potential for students to be co-participants, via a critical education, risks being further co-opted through the marketization of higher education by constructing students as consumers. Central to this is the reconfiguration of Higher

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Education (HE) into a specific set of instrumental and measurable outputs, which students consume in order to attain a specific level of achievement to their satisfaction for the price paid. Thus we suggest that the potential for the notion of student engagement, emerging out of a critical pedagogy, has been marketized and now guides how students evaluate and engage in HE. Universities are now thoroughly instrumentalized, as measured in terms of managerial quality assurance and determining how students are asked to evaluate what we do as academics. Specifically, we argue that marketization reduces the institutional space and opportunities for both lecturers and students to exercise their 'pedagogic rights' to personal enhancement, social inclusion and civic participation through education (Bernstein, 1996, 7).

We will start by outlining the relevant components of marketization processes, and their associated practices of financialization and managerialism, that have developed in response to the 'legitimation crisis' in HE. Next, we examine how student engagement has been appropriated and redefined as a quantifiable measurement of 'student satisfaction', which then profoundly alters both students' experience of learning and academics' relationship to them. We conclude that, while many lecturers continue to struggle to engage students via a critical pedagogy in order to secure their pedagogic rights, the changed relationship to students and institutional constraints makes it increasingly difficult.

## The Marketization of Higher Education

Ransome (2011) argues that the shift from elite to mass higher education has had a number of consequences. In the past thirty years or so, UK policy has focused predominantly on widening participation in higher education. With rising (graduate) unemployment, universities and students have become more exposed to the formal rationality of 'economic instrumentalism' in the approach to degrees as primarily concerned with improving employability (DPIS, 2011; HEFCE, 2007). At the same time, we are finding that an increasing number of our own students are adopting an 'instrumental' orientation, whose motivation to attend university is primarily as a means to getting a 2.1 and securing a better job. Habermas' concept of a 'legitimation crisis' (Ewert, 1991) is useful in identifying the shifts that have occurred in response to crises in the economic, political and motivational spheres which in turn have led to a crisis in

the legitimacy of a university education and ushered in the marketization, financialization and managerialism that now underpin it (Munene, 2009).

There is little dispute that the process of the marketization of HE has intensified over the last decade (Deem and Brehony, 2007) and is now the over-arching context in which HE is delivered. Yet it ought not to be assumed that the impacts and effects of this process are unitary (Beck, 2007; Newman and Jahdi, 2009). Thus, any examination of the way in which the process of marketization is embraced is partially determined by local specificities, such as the extent to which a head of department embraces micro-management or the differential impact of the financialization of funding. Notwithstanding this qualification, we argue that marketization entails shifting the position of the student within the sector. With increasing numbers and the funding streams attached to students, universities became sucked into cycles of competition to recruit. When students started to pay fees academics re-configured what they do to be far more attentive to what students need and want. This potentially had the capacity to make lecturers pay more attention to their modes of communication, the cultural and social variation of their students and to prepare a route for rigorous student engagement. However, when the central thrust of that re-evaluation is undertaken within the rubric of marketization and finance, the main way the student is re-configured vis-à-vis the lecturer is to be positioned as a consumer and the lecturer re-defined as a service provider (Pollitt,1993; Ranson, 2003).

**The Rise of Service Provision and Managerialism**

Marketization as a whole is multi-faceted but we argue that there are four notable shifts that are particularly pertinent for our discussion here: 1) the emergence of the 'public purse', where the public sector as a whole needed to be held accountable and thus demonstrate cost effectiveness or value for money to the tax payer as part of a wider legitimation crisis hitting the public realm; 2) the re-definition of academics from public servants to service providers, where quality is assured as a result of the market mechanism (Deem and Brehony, 2007; McGrath, 2003; Newman and Jahdi, 2009) the introduction of student fees which re-positioned students as consumers, a process that has intensified as fees have increased; and, 4) the use of league tables that has enabled status groups (Wegener, 1992), such as the Russell Group, to marketize prestige and capitalize upon social networks and capital that their student body bring with them, with

the much valued knock-on effect of significantly improving their graduate employment and destination statistics[2], which in turn re-affirms their position, something that is largely unavailable to the post-1992 sector.

Ranson (2003) characterizes the 'legitimation crisis' as a re-definition of the public sphere and the functions and status of the publically funded and structured institutions within it. He argues that it ushered in a new era of accountability and governance so that professionals are accountable to the public purse and not merely the closed shop, as it were, of professional bodies. However, what this entailed was a radical shift in how we make an organization accountable. Ranson draws on Power (1999 as cited in Ranson 2003, 459) arguing that accountability constitutes a thorough-going re-structuring so that it is no longer a component of, but rather constitutes the system itself. Power refers to this as the 'audit society' (as cited in Ranson, 2003, 459). The shift to emphasizing the performance of a publically funded service, not only radically alters how performance is understood, but also leads to a re-adjustment of the performance itself, according to the criteria of the audit. In particular, the complex and qualitative components of engaging in public service are re-mastered into quantifiable models of evaluation.

There are four principle components to re-structuring that characterizes the audit society and all firmly rest within the bounds of a thorough-going instrumental orientation to delivery and evaluation. It begins with delineating the aims and objectives of any specific task, whereby aims need to be firmly translated into measureable outputs or goals. This involves the displacement of an underlying substantive engagement in the principles of an activity, in this case student engagement via a critical pedagogy, replacing it with a pragmatic stance of 'what works', or in the case of university, what the students rate best (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Then, there needs to be consistent and on-going evaluations of performance in order to identify best practice, ensure a maximized use of resources, efficiency and effectiveness. The description of the delivery of a module is recast from an analysis of specific pedagogic techniques to measuring the percentage that pass the module, the grades achieved, proposals to act on student module evaluations, *etc*. Each measurement is given its respective weight as the

[2] Seemingly neutral, destination statistics are therefore heavily weighted to the prestige as it capitalizes upon the social networks of the students wider social circle and specific advantages they have with tapping into the hidden labour market. See for example http://www.graduateopportunities.com/your-career/getting-that-job/networking-hidden-job-markets/).

audit of a module passes to the course leader, then head of department, to the faculty and upwards. Moreover, in many post-1992 institutions, these evaluations are no longer confidential but are instead stored in document sharing sites where summaries of the performance are posposted up for students to read as a basis for making their future module choices.

It is in this sense that Ranson argues that evaluation can take on a punitive form of judgement. Ranson draws on Dunn (1996) and Dunsire (1978) to argue that accountability within the university takes place within an intensely hierarchical structure so that to provide an account of a pedagogic innovation comes to be much more than explaining what has happened. Previously, unintended consequences of action were seen as integral to the interaction between students and lecturer in terms of the ability of a single person to enact a pedagogic principle or practice. Now however, as a consequence of judgement becoming punitive and success being measured according to a rigid set of external criteria, often divorced from any pedagogic principle, unexpected events tend to be registered as failures (Abbas and McClean, 2003). Thus, in a university, being accountable is to be accountable against an external measure, standard or expectation. These are most obviously expressed in key performance indicators (KPIs) that are then fed back into departmental indicators, specifying the extent to which the quantified output is achieved. The differences between staff are noted and appraised, thereby threatening collegiality[3]. Accountability is bureaucratized and thus experienced as a specific event of judgement. Moreover, in such a punitive context of evaluation, trust becomes a central casualty to the loss of professionalism. Frowe (2005) argues that trust is a central facet, albeit tacit, as it is manifest in a professional's capacity to act autonomously. These discretionary powers lie beyond what Downie (1990) calls 'legal legitimacy', because these powers of judgement cannot be legislated for, that is, it is precisely this non-instrumental element that falls out of the remit of structured and quantitative measures. As we will describe later, this loss of professionalism is experienced both as the erosion of trust but also the erosion of agency. To borrow from Ranson to conclude:

[3] Furthermore, those members of staff that focus specifically on gaining high quantitative scores threaten further their colleagues who seek to engage students through a curriculum that challenges, is innovative and thus unfamiliar to the student and tends towards increased anxiety while undertaking the learning; the consequence is often low module satisfaction scores.

> this form of accountability with its potentially punitive image,.. has become anathema to professional communities who reject its instrumental rationale and techniques. Professionals are being subject to a process that denies their agency (Ranson, 2003, 460).

There is then the final impact, namely the introduction of fees and the differential impact that this has had upon HE as a whole, along with the specific use of league tables as a mechanism for selection and recruitment. Clearly, different universities occupy different market positions, which are in part secured by the history of the sector as a whole but also by the differential access to the other core mode of quantification, namely the research exercise. Given the impetus of managerialism to operate within the domain of measurable and achievable outputs, research funding is then awarded to those with a track record of successful research, and given the historical position of the pre-1992 universities, most of the research funding and thus the distribution of prestige is disproportionately located in the top third of the sector. This is self-reproducing and thus the league tables that rely heavily on research ratings will locate those universities at the top, regardless of the actual undergraduate experience a student may have. Students, when faced with the funding gaps, prestige and destination statistics, will tend to award status to the top third, thus enabling the Russell Group to recruit from the highest entry qualifications, reflecting as they do the class position of the students in question (Ball, 2003), and the wider social and economic capital of their cohort.

To conclude this section, we argue that marketization also undermines the agency of the student. Meaningful engagement is hindered when the delivery of a module is undertaken within the constraints of quantifiable measurements of satisfaction, which is how many students are now invited to interpret their experience of learning. We suggest that this encourages delivery within highly structured and predictable environments, where free-flowing and open forms of delivery become less welcome. In the university, this means marginalizing the ephemeral, reciprocal and intersubjective interactions in a classroom, largely because quantitative measurement objectifies and fails to capture the communicative interaction of transformative learning. Instead, the quantitative measures flag up 'objects' such as value for money in terms of the resources consumed. For example, students are increasingly making complaints about assessments. Dialogue is reified as an object of exchange which has been articulated in terms of the market so that there is a specific set of things provided by the service and bought by the consumer. What is lost within the quantitative representation

of student experience are the more ephemeral qualities of engaging students in an intersubjective exchange where dialogic communication enhances the student's understanding and that rather marvellous moment is reached, for both student and lecturer, when the penny drops.

**Student Satisfaction and the Erosion of Pedagogic Rights**

The Coalition White Paper (DPIS 2011) on *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* makes it clear that student satisfaction ratings will be the measure by which courses will be chosen by prospective students and which will stimulate competition between academics as they seek to achieve the highest scores. Lawson *et al* (2012) express their concern with turning students into consumers, which is reflected in making them complete satisfaction surveys. They argue that students are encouraged to judge their education in instrumental terms of value for money and to sue if they do not get the service and grades they want. In fact, there is already evidence that students are more litigious about their grades in this new fee-paying era (Grove, 2014). Additionally, Lawson *et al.* (2012) question the validity of how student satisfaction is measured, especially the use of the overall score of student satisfaction in the NSS as the key indicator, and highlight the problems of defining and measuring success[4]. Crucially, they make the point that universities are not in the business of satisfying students as consumers of education but in educating them in an environment conducive to them exercising their pedagogic rights to learn and develop. This is the intrinsic value of a critical pedagogy. However, in treating students as consumers Rowan (2013) suggests that academics are under pressure to cosset them, for example, by making themselves constantly available and changing their teaching practices to make the content less challenging. She further reports that student evaluations are sometimes little more than popularity contests, based on the age, gender and appearance of the lecturer, which say little about the quality of teaching or the learning experience. Booth *et al.* (2009) interviewed university lecturers who felt driven by the NSS to set out ever clearer prescriptions of what students have to do, a feature which is an expression of a 'visible pedagogy' of formal instruction which, if it stands alone, is antithetical to student engagement. One lecturer describes the abandonment of rigorous student engagement thus:

[4] This is equally the case for the *Guardian* league table which contrasts entry points with degree qualification and describes this as value added.

> if we understand higher education as people being encouraged to think for themselves and to ask certain questions of themselves and their world… I really think it is a sort of deprivation to kind of deprive human beings of a space to ask questions of themselves and the world (Booth *et al*., 2009, 936).

What we argue is that teaching to student satisfaction, narrowly defined according to a consumer rationale, is antithetical to engaging students through a critical pedagogy that should endeavour to shift the paradigms of their thinking towards liminal spaces (Meyer and Land, 2006). Furthermore, how is such an experience of learning to be captured given the quantitative measures of teaching quality to which we are subject

Many academics feel a strong sense of responsibility to challenge students' thinking about social justice issues and to teach them the critical skills of a reflexive questioning of their own assumptions despite the risk of receiving poor evaluations that such a challenge can produce. Rowan (2013) reports that many lecturers think it is no longer worth the risk and describes one lecturer's reflections on the stress entailed:

> The topic is so important, there just feels like there is so much at stake. I just HAVE to sell this message to them because I am not sure anyone else will… And it is stressful…but still we need them to learn how to talk about these controversial topics (Rowan, 2013, 147).

What is being raised here is how the unproblematic acceptance of student evaluations, and, most importantly, the ways in which students are ask to evaluate, leads to student judgments of quality overriding professional judgments on important matters such as content, pedagogy and assessment. Thus, in the end, it means that the 'students' perceptions of a good education will help to shape the education that institutions provide' (Rowan, 2013, 407). For example, student evaluations of individual modules are now made available to students as a basis for module choices and to heads of departments to judge whether modules should be kept or cut. In our experience of teaching research methods, there is also an issue of timing as students complete module evaluations before it finishes and at a point in the module when students often complain that it is too difficult, the workshop format too unstructured and dislike the group-work component[5]. The structure and delivery of the module represent our commitment to a critical pedagogy, challenging students to engage with methods rather than regurgitate the textbook in an exam and to work more independently and collaboratively with peers. By the end of the module, the students are more aware of how much they have

[5] On dissemination of our pedagogic practice on this module we have received high peer acclaim, both within the university and wider social science academics at an HEA conference on methods' teaching, but the lower student evaluation meant that the module was at one stage put under threat.

learnt, how rewarding was the effort that they put into it, and feel better prepared for their dissertations. However, the student module evaluations do not reflect this transformation. The pressure is on to 'sell' such differences to students and the pedagogic commitments that underpin them or to jettison them to achieve higher ratings. Far from empowering students as consumers, the ability to fulfil their pedagogic rights is being compromised as are those of academics to deliver a different sort of education. It is to the impact on academics that we now turn.

**Being a Lecturer; Experiencing Managerial Control**

The flip side of obtaining student satisfaction is the sheer hard work and the physical and emotional demands put on staff to maintain this level of performativity (Hey, 2011). For example, Rowan cites a lecturer's reflections on teaching two modules highly rated by students. They are worth quoting here as they resonate with our own experiences:

> Every single time, when there is a message, I respond to it. Even if I have responded to the exact same question a THOUSAND times before… and I actually want to SCREAM and say 'can you maybe figure out one thing by yourselves???' But I can't. It's not their fault. I've trained them to think this is normal… And at the heart of it I love my teaching and my students (Rowan, 2013, 146).

This quote raises the question of what impact does the constant availability and tendency to spoon feed them with information, reassurance, *etc*. have on students' learning experience and the ability to work independently? In our own department of Social and Historical Studies, one idea implemented to raise student satisfaction ratings was to answer student emails within a few hours and to keep our doors open so that students could drop-in at any time, both of which we did and were generally appreciated by students. However, the result was that many of us were answering emails at weekends, with some students complaining if we failed to do so and dropping by our offices became the norm. After all this passion, commitment and care which characterizes so many academics' experience, there is still no guarantee of positive evaluations and the relentless pressure of performing to meet targets set for student satisfaction contributes significantly to the rising stress levels that characterize our daily work and undermine our pedagogic rights. As Parker (2014) writes, NSS and such methodologies are being used as a managerialist strategy to 'intensify competitive behaviour' between colleagues to achieve the best ratings and for them to 'display expected emotions' however they really feel, despite increased workloads and stress

levels. Like others (Booth *et al.*, 2009; David, 2011; Hey and Morley, 2011), he identifies the pressures on 'women managers in particular to put in the emotional labour required to implement increased workloads in a neoliberal economy' (Parker, 2014, 236).

The pressures of student satisfaction are only one aspect of the increasing 'colonization of the lifeworld of academics', a concept used by Habermas and applied by Abbas and McLean (2003, 72) to capture the distorted forms of communication arising from rapid transformations in academic life. Such colonization disrupts the taken-for-granted aspects of being an academic in higher education, previously characterized as having greater freedom, autonomy and trust to work individually and collaboratively with other academics, management and students to deliver higher education (Molesworth *et al.* 2009). Of course, we need to be wary of painting a golden age of the academy (Collini, 2012) as entirely democratic or fully achieving the goals of a participatory democratic education. Nevertheless, we do need to challenge the ways in which the current culture and organization of universities are sucking the critical life out of them (Hey and Morley, 2011), and to appreciate how the current conditions for lecturers in higher education are changing so rapidly and colonizing our 'lifeworlds', most notably through the loss of autonomy and the increased control of our time[6].

The impact of massive cuts in a period of widening participation are differentially impacting across the pre and post-92 universities (McLean *et al*., 2013), which have different resources to deal with them. For example, high student satisfaction is said to account for the premier positions of Cambridge, Oxford and St Andrews in the 2014 *Guardian* league tables, but it is no accident that it is the post-1992 universities which have higher staff-student ratios, spend less per student, and offer fewer career prospects, all of which positions them in the bottom half of the league tables (*Guardian*, 2.6.2014)[7]. Students are being directly encouraged by the government to be critical of their courses and what their universities provide for the £9,000 fees at the same time as universities are coping with fewer resources. Thus lecturers face daily challenges of larger classes, less contact time to spend with students to develop better relationships and fewer module choices whilst trying to provide a high quality education (Booth *et*

[6] Especially, micro-management of hours' allocations for teaching and research, intensification of workloads, increased administrative duties, availability to students and myriad other ways.
[7] Although McClean *et a.l* (2013) suggests that this does not uniformly map onto the quality of the pedagogy delivered.

*al.*, 2009). In particular, the stranglehold of economic and instrumental rationality, associated managerialism and increased administrative demands are driving forward reforms in higher education. Academics are required to do a lot more work now, for example, to complete administrative tasks, audit our performance in myriad ways and we are 'over-stimulated' by new vocabularies, rules and initiatives (Pollitt, 2007). These are commanding our constant attention in marketing, improving teaching, developing new courses, bidding for funds and redefining what constitutes our academic work (Hey and Morley, 2011).

Abbas and McLean (2003) similarly identify a range of factors as distorting communications about teaching which are colonizing the lifeworlds of academics. Firstly, they note the pressures associated with contemporary improvement initiatives, which are all about demonstrating success. Secondly, the intensification of time in terms of its managerial determination which leaves little time or scope left for creativity and reflection. For example, we went through the lengthy process of revalidation of our degree last year, despite knowing that it will have to be done again this year when the new credit structure is introduced. Thirdly, micro-management and incursions on autonomy are met by small acts of resistance to the rationalization of work processes through recouping time, finding short cuts, *etc.* Finally, there is a growing awareness of a mistrust between lecturers and management due to the fast increase in managerial control, auditing, surveillance and changes in expectations and demands. Recent changes at our university in the model of workload allocation will result in more of our time being accountable and holidays being allocated in terms of hours. Additionally, there is a trend towards the downgrading of roles and a lack of parity in how hours are distributed and roles allocated. Such changes also have affective costs driven by affective asymmetries. As Hey (2011) argues:

> Higher education is likely to find itself even more saturated by inequities and associated emotions/ affects/ desire, ridden with even more competitive pressure, pains, pleasures and their anxieties (Hey, 2011, 218)

Importantly, Hey reminds us how the inequities are differentially distributed across different structural dynamics, focusing on gender in particular with regard to women academics doing much more of the emotional, caring and support work with students, work and colleagues.

This section has established the erosion of both students' and academics' pedagogic rights in these 'miserablist' times (Hey, 2011) and undoubtedly student satisfaction ratings are here to stay. In a period of rapid change over the past five years or so, some of the changes described above need to be addressed more imaginatively through forms of resistance, accommodation and creativity in order to protect students' and our pedagogic rights in HE. We might speculate that the generally low response rates on module evaluations suggest that many students are not that interested in completing them and they do value and appreciate their university experience and the opportunities afforded to them to exercise their pedagogic rights. It is also the case that many academics do still love their jobs, care deeply about their students, despite changed relationships, and remain committed to delivering a critical education (Rowan, 2013). As Hey and Morley (2011) point out:

> Here are our students and their studying, their lives and our lives entwined in deep commitments that cannot be captured by thin notions of the 'economical man' which seem to haunt the imaginary of the policy mandarins (Hey and Morley, 2011, 169).

## Conclusion

Thus we conclude that student engagement, which once codified the expectation of a shared dialogic relationship between lecturers and students in various forms of critical pedagogy within a democratic frame of reference (Taylor and Robinson, 2009), has been channelled towards an instrumental, marketized conceptualization redefining education as the route to better employment prospects (DPIS, 2011). Student experience, when quantified through NSS and league tables, is thus objectified within the broader consumerist logic of the market in which resources, status and reputation are inequitably distributed between universities and disciplines. What happens in classrooms is measured via quantitative performance indicators and accompanied by managerial processes of accountability and efficiency, displacing and marginalizing, as it does, critical pedagogies. The university landscape is transformed by different understandings of what acquiring knowledge requires and also should feel like. In our experience of the post-1992 sector, we increasingly experience that we are working within conditions of 'reified exchange' (Juetten, 2001). For example, every aspect of the degree is monetized as the financing for a subject can only be guaranteed for that year, leading to individual modules being scrutinized and costed, with the result that any differences in pedagogic delivery, such as workshops which are more expensive than

lectures and seminars, have to be justified financially leading to greater standardization. Moreover, a poor score on student satisfaction, could spell the end of a module or course, thereby negating pedagogic rights for students and academics alike, regardless of the fact that quantitative measures cannot capture the transformative learning that a *difficult module* may contain. The question remains as to how we continue to deliver educational practices that open up ideas beyond the affirmation of what is already assumed and, instead, integrate challenging and qualitative learning and the right to know. That is, how do we engage students? Specifically, therefore, we advocate a critical education as unsettling students' common-sense understandings and decoupling them from knowledge, recognizing that identity is fragmentary and that learning is hard and often involves high levels of anxiety and effort. In the search for an ethical commitment to protecting students' pedagogic rights, there is still plenty of scope for confidence in the passion of academics to engage students; as there is in the discernment of students who value the sort of teaching quality which inspires their critical understanding and has a transformative potential in how they live their lives and feel more or less included in society.

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