

Universiti Autonomy as Social Practice

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Introduction

In Malaysia, the connection between educational reform and the values of Malaysian society needs articulation. Debates over university autonomy and globalisation are usually articulated within a frame of reference caught between two polarities: the market and the state. Universities themselves are deemed to lie between these two spheres. Thus the three key institutional spheres: the university, the market (business) and the state define the 'triple helix' of relationships that characterise knowledge production in the Higher Education sector. According to Henry Etzkowitz, the triple helix 'is a spiral model of innovation that captures multiple reciprocal relationships at different points in the process of knowledge capitalisation.' Etzkowitz argues that the, 'triple helix denotes the university-industry-government relationship as one of relatively equal, yet interdependent, institutional spheres which overlap and take the role of the other' (Etzkowitz, 2002). Contemporary discussions about university autonomy and pedagogical change are couched within an overriding neo-liberal discourse that avoids the critical issues of social value, sustainability and the common good by subsuming them under the aims of competition, consumption and radical neo-liberal individualism (Comaroff and John, 2001). Within such a discursive paradigm structural changes to university institutional governance, administration and function are overdetermined by a competitive and individualistic ethos.

spheres is the assertion that the university needs to restructure its relationships with the market and the state but, also, reform its pedagogy. The demands of the knowledge economy and globalisation necessitate engaging with socially constructivist pedagogy as a way of addressing the limitations and narrowness of traditional authoritarian 'top down' teaching methods. However, the hegemony of neo-liberalism also informs how socially constructivist pedagogy (Phillips, 1995; Slezak, 2000) is taken up and expressed in educational institutions. Socially constructivist pedagogy contains within it a critical binary. This binary can be characterised as a tension between constructivist pedagogy as individual self-expression and constructivist pedagogy as dialogical engagement with social values. The idea that differing forms of pedagogical engagement taken up in universities is autonomous from the overarching values of the institution is flawed. Socially constructivist pedagogy, which is the hallmark of pedagogical reform in a knowledge economy both, informs the broader values of the university and is informed by the values of the university.

Properly understood however, pedagogy is not simply technique. The meaning of constructivism is not immune to the social frameworks and discourses within which it is practiced. Pedagogy is a form of social practice. It involves social capital and draws on cultural traditions. Understood in this way pedagogical practice within a university are forms of social interaction and expressions of cultural values. Pedagogical reform and social structural reform go hand in hand. Nonetheless, the way these changes interact is problematic. An educational project that articulates universities as simply market driven entities and sees autonomy as simply freedom from regulation within a possessive individualistic frame of reference will correspond to a social value system that is individualistic, competitive and possessive. Socially constructivist pedagogy either will be in severe tension with this ethos or identified with it as part of an assault on values and equity.

The social values and capital that inform pedagogy both in its formal level as officially sanctioned techniques but also in its informal level as the implicit practices that characterise human interaction on campus require a much closer look at the relationship between pedagogy, social structure and social values. Constructivist pedagogy taught in an environment that is infused with neo-liberal values of competition, profit, individualism and competition will tend to reward forms of self-expression by students that are possessive, individualistic and competitive. If this thesis is correct then resistance to pedagogical reform in Malaysia's universities will adhere to criticisms of the overly individualised and ethically problematic values that self-expression and individual development take in a neo liberal environment.

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A corollary of this structural understanding of the role of universities and their relationship to diverse institutional

The adages of neo liberal economic and progressive pedagogical theory are often espoused without adequate recognition of the cultural complexity and problems that characterise host societies. My essential argument is that neo liberal economic and structural reform to universities if carried through uncritically carries with it severe problems if it uncritically accepts a kind of laissez faire market approach to universities (Levin, 2001). This is because marketisation in extremis undercuts the values that inform progressive and normatively engaged pedagogy: especially socially constructivist pedagogy. In other words, pure marketisation undercuts the social values of recognition, respect and cultural value realised through a proper and balanced social constructivist pedagogy. Market values especially as they are institutionalised tend to privilege and reward the individualistic expressive and possessive values that characterise one side of the constructivist binary. The problem with this is that the values of cooperation, dialogue and respectful engagement with others tend to be sidelined by the neo-liberal competitive ethos.

Civil Society

Marketisation in Malaysian universities must be tempered by also connecting universities to civil society in such a way that tempers both extremes of the state and market and allows a more sustainable relationship between cooperative socially constructivist pedagogy and the social framework within which it operates. In the Malaysian context, the growing salience of civil society, associations, clubs and social movements is acting as a propellant for democratic reform and social legitimacy (Saravanamuttu, 2001; Weiss and Hassan, 2002; Weiss and Hassan, 2002). In an ideological terrain where both the state and the market are viewed with suspicion by different constituencies, the legitimacy that derives from connectivity to the growing civil society in the Malaysian polity is in educational debates largely ignored (Weiss, 2006).

Deepening Malaysian universities connection and engagement with civil society and connecting them more intrinsically to the public good (not as state provision and direction nor as market driven individualism) provides a way to frame autonomy as neither beholden to the state or the market. It also provides cultural space and support for social practices (pedagogy) that are neither radically individualist nor didactically authoritarian. Forms of social capital underpin the ability of Malaysian universities to successfully reform pedagogically and structurally and these factors are reflexive to each other. A failure to include the fourth strand within the helix metaphor of civil society in the discussion of university functioning will lead to unintended consequences both in the legitimacy of the university in Malaysian society and in the legitimacy of forms of pedagogy necessary for the knowledge society.

A corollary of this argument is that any reform to Malaysian education must take into account the specific cultural and national traditions of the host society. A simplistic notion of easy transference between pedagogical

and structural models from the west to Malaysian conditions is bound to lead to difficulty. The types of interrelations that characterise university structures and practices can add or detract from the legitimacy of reform (Sohail, 2003; Mustapha and Abdullah, 2001). They also can add or subtract from the legitimacy within universities of certain approaches to pedagogy.

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Innovation

The necessary cultural change and reflexive relationship between social structures and social capital that is a prerequisite to building an effective knowledge society is often under theorised or oversimplified. However an over simplification of our understanding of innovation and development means that fully marketised universities will place negative pressure on principles of collaboration and cooperation which are the hall marks of innovation. Here lies the tension. To defend a space for innovation as collaboration and non-possessive engagement a significant strand of university practice must be involved with civil society and civic engagement. Ultimately, innovation also comes from revisions in pedagogical practice that allow creativity and inspiration to flourish. Yet creativity and innovation rely on cooperative principles of trust (Tonkiss et al. 2000) as much as on freedom from restriction. The practices of engagement with civil society are an expression of lateral engagement and a process of legitimising social interactions that are collaborative, non-hierarchical yet culturally respectful. These values, which are implicit in the turn towards civil society, percolate down to pedagogy.

Cultural and social practices in Malaysia that characterise top down knowledge production and linear forms of information sharing in non-collaborative relationships are the products of social structures and the ideologies that justify and perpetuate them (Malairaja and Zawdie, 2004). These militate against sharing and more dynamic forms of collaboration that characterise the best practices of the knowledge economy. The concept of sharing between multiple participants requires quite a different ethos that tempers competition and strict individual ownership with collaboration and lateral approaches. Both hierarchical and individualistic possessive forms of social relations (and the pedagogy, which corresponds to this) negate the types of

interactions necessary for innovation in the changed circumstances of globalisation. Just as in companies so to in universities the structures and normative value systems that correspond with these structures need to change. In simple terms, Etzkowitz points out, '[t]here is a reciprocal relationship between organisational and cognitive innovation' (Viale and Etzkowitz, 2005).

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Conclusion

If autonomy is reduced to simple marketisation then pedagogy based on collaboration, free dialogue and innovation will be under stress in universities. The pressure of the neo liberal ethos will be too hard to resist. If autonomy is understood as being protected from the market by the state, then it is hard to see how creativity and innovation can take root as core values in the academy and by inference in the pedagogy of the academy. The effective promotion of the 'fourth strand' to the helix structure situates the dynamic possibilities of Malaysian civil society within the university structure (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 2002). It acts to bring legitimacy to universities in an era where suspicion of both the state and the market abound (Berger et al. 1996; Margalit, 1996). Finally such a restructuring provides a better home and support for forms of socially constructivist pedagogy rooted in a concern for democratic growth, respect of difference and dignity.

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