



Navigating the Tides of Globalisation and Neoliberalism: A Critical Approach to 21st century Tertiary Education.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, the world has experienced a period of major social, economic and political change. Globalisation has placed increasing pressure on our work, families and communities and is continuously transforming the way we live in the 21st century. Internationally, and despite calls for freedom and equality, social and economic inequities continue to increase. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, these forces have had a large impact on our society, our economy and on our tertiary education system. In an uncertain, 21st century world, it is our responsibility as educators to prepare learners for participation in the free market economy. It is also necessary however, to encourage the skills and attributes that will ensure a sustainable and democratic future. To achieve and balance these ideals, requires the creation of humanistic learning environments that promote a culture of self-awareness and critical reflection. This article suggests that, through adopting a critical approach to education, it is possible to work within the constraints of the current tertiary system and, at the same time, promote the principles of social equity, transformation and personal freedom.

INTRODUCTION

It isn't about maintaining the status quo but the direction and implications of change...Our task is not to predict what will happen, but to tip the system so that what will happen corresponds in some measure to what we would like to happen...(Laszlo, 2006)

Arguably, the greatest educational challenge confronting education in the 21st century is that of educating a growing, increasingly diverse set of learners capable of living effectively in a complex 21st century world. The economic implications of globalisation have prompted many countries around the world to move from industrial to knowledge-based economies and, the skills and competencies associated with 21st-century education, are often promoted as being critical to achieving this aim. As a result, tertiary education, traditionally a forum for fostering creativity, deeper knowledge and critical thinking, has become increasingly connected to economic productivity and creating citizens

for a knowledge economy (Peters & Besley, 2013). Over the past few decades, tertiary education in New Zealand has been transformed and, while some have welcomed these changes as necessary for its refocusing and renewal, others warn against the damaging effects of unilateral compliance to economic imperatives and the subsequent impact on institutional culture and academic practices (Lambert, Parker & Neary, 2007). What tends to be neglected in the dominant debate however, is a broader discussion about the purpose and value of education itself, and about its role in re-imagining a future world (Apple, 2011; Biesta, 2010; Giroux, 2012).

Tertiary education is widely criticised for its focus on a market driven paradigm and neglect of critical social responsibility (e.g. Giroux, 2012). Many educators believe that encouraging continual and critical learning should be its primary objective and that, rather than just screening and sorting for future employment, it should also seek to produce new knowledge. This necessitates going beyond explicit, course-related goals and viewing learning in wider terms (Boud, 2000; Bowden & Marton, 2003; Carr, 1995). Several decades ago, Paulo Freire articulated the problems of well-being, humanisation and education within a grossly unequal society. He critiqued what he referred to as 'banking education', and described an alternative process of learning for liberation through dialogic praxis (2000). This philosophy of education takes account of the social and individual processes that facilitate learning and human development. In an epistemological framework it moves beyond education as a form of transference of knowledge, advocates for change and is significant in the quest for a new logic that challenges neoliberal ideology, nurtures democracy, and examines the ways in which, quality tertiary education is delivered and measured (Smith, Ryoo & McLaren, 2009).

NEOLIBERALISM AND TERTIARY EDUCATION POLICY IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

In New Zealand, the tertiary education sector encompasses private training establishments (PTEs), institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), *wānanga*¹, universities and workplace training providers. These institutions offer a variety of educational options to post-secondary learners ranging from transition to work programmes, through to community education, postgraduate study and research (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], n.d). In the late 1980s, reform of the sector began when the Treasury argued that the system was failing to respond to rapidly changing economic conditions (Roberts, 2013). The swiftly applied, neoliberal solution was to implement tertiary education policy that placed emphasis on learning as the primary determinant of economic prosperity and social cohesion. Neoliberalism is an economic, social, and political strand of capitalism characterised by a pro-commerce, limited government ideology (Kirylo, 2013). Its application is more specifically recognisable by free markets, flexible workforces and distrust of education. According to neoliberal logic, economic rationality operates as the

¹ New Zealand university providers offering education in a Māori cultural context

primary framework for understanding, evaluating and governing society and, over time, it has become the way much of the western world is interpreted, inhabited and understood (Shahjahan, 2014). Its supporters point to the way it has advanced information networks, grown economies and improved the lives of billions of people (Winslow, 2015). In its extreme form however, neoliberalism in education is characterised by a market-led approach that views learners as commodities, teachers as functionaries, and its primary purpose as singularly bound to economic growth and human capital development (Harvey, 2005; Kirylo, 2013).

The political rhetoric of neoliberalism states that, by participating in tertiary education, individuals will acquire skills and abilities that enable them to perform more effectively and productively within the labour market. The adoption of this view of education as an economic benefit, redefines it as a private value to the individual, rather than a public value to the state (Stuart, 2013). Notions of human capital imply that those who gain higher levels of education will contribute to the knowledge economy and be rewarded in turn, by higher levels of personal income (Codd, 2002). According to The World Bank (2002, p.xvii), “knowledge accumulation and application have become major factors in economic development and are, increasingly, at the core of a country’s competitive advantage in the global economy”. Drummond (2003) suggests that in a knowledge economy, knowledge assumes an economic value and is produced in order to be consumed. This implies that within tertiary education, knowledge becomes something exchanged for a cost and this has led to it being considered a commercial product in the business of education. Consequently, tertiary education providers become ‘knowledge producers’ exposed to market forces and a competitive commercial environment.

Over the past few decades, the economic functions of tertiary education in New Zealand have remained paramount, with the sector seen as having a key role in securing the country’s economic and social future (Codd, 2002). Despite subsequent changes in government, in most respects, the overall strategic framework for tertiary education has remained unchanged (Roberts, 2013). Tertiary education policy is derived from national goals, and formed by the Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014)., which provides the basis for the prioritisation of institutional actions. Specific accountability requirements are articulated as performance commitments, negotiated with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), also providing strategic and regulatory advice, allocating funding, and promoting research and evaluation. Quality assurance is monitored by NZQA via external review processes, and linked to government funding. Currently, operating alongside the TEC, are a number of other governmental agencies, trade and student unions, and a wide range of stakeholder organisations. The inevitable result of this mix is a tertiary education system bound by a combination of centralised governance and driven by market-oriented dynamics.

THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND 21ST CENTURY EDUCATION

Because tertiary education is perceived as crucial to economic globalism, it is of primary importance to governments, corporations, and those that want to

use the development and dissemination of knowledge to aid in the expansion of the world economy (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002). According to Apple (2004) tertiary education is important to business, because it is the means to educate an efficient and knowledgeable work force, and to generate research capabilities resulting in marketable products. Educational standards, assessment, accreditation, and planning are especially important to organisations, who may seek to influence educational systems and make them more efficient and productive (Bloland, 2005). Inevitably however, this ideology of instrumentalism favours some forms of knowledge over others and therefore, affects what we perceive as knowledge in our society (Codd, 2002). Akbari (2008) claims that, the same people who have the power to make decisions in society, are also those who have the power to design and implement educational systems. Consequently, their ideas and values are accepted and promoted while those of other, less powerful groups and individuals are not. As a 2005 UNESCO report suggests, in a knowledge-based society, it is not always clear whose knowledge is being endorsed or how it is being accessed at local and global levels. Today, as in the past, this control of knowledge can go hand in hand with serious inequality, exclusion and social conflict.

As the new economy of the 21st century continues to develop around knowledge-based activities, the ability to create and trade in this knowledge has become synonymous with the ability to generate profit (Boyles, 2012). This emphasis places pressure on companies to employ workers with higher levels of skills in order to successfully counter local and global competition. Although tertiary education is considered necessary to secure well-paid employment, it appears that not all graduates are as adept in the higher-level knowledge and information-based skills as employers need and expect (Cavanagh, Kay, Klein, & Meisinger, 2006). Additionally, a shortage of highly skilled employees is believed to limit the development of new companies and therefore inhibit economic growth. The response to this has been a call for education policy, institutions and educators at all levels to ensure that learners develop the skills and competencies necessary to contribute effectively to the globalised labour market (Boyles, 2012). The '21st century learner' is a ubiquitous concept that, although emerging only in recent years, has been widely adopted. Many Western countries, including New Zealand, have carried out educational reforms by integrating 21st-century frameworks into policy and curriculum (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). This alignment across different national documents is, according to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), an example of policy convergence and reflective of the increasing globalisation of education. Ball (2010) suggests therefore that it is unsurprising to find general consensus, within a number of educational frameworks, on the desired skills and dispositions of the 21st century learner. These focus primarily on a set of multidisciplinary, multimodal, and transferable skills that emphasise the need for critical thinking and innovation alongside the integration of technology and life skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Voogt and Roblin's (2012) analysis of current major frameworks 21st century frameworks, concludes that there appears to be strong agreement on the need for competencies in the areas of communication, collaboration and digital technology alongside social and cultural awareness. Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation are also regarded as important by most.

Although there is general consensus on the desired skills and capabilities of the 21st century learner, there are also differences in specifications across the various frameworks. Williams, Gannon and Sawyer (2013) suggest that these may be explained by considering the range of conditions operating across the organisational and national contexts within which the documents were created. The main differences in specifications relate to the weight afforded to economic and democratic imperatives although Williams et al. (2013) note that sometimes the latter are missing altogether. According to Yates and Collins (2010), although industry-led agendas frequently focus on the need for self-management and entrepreneurialism, it is important to recognise that the 21st century learner is not simply a neoliberal construct and is also complicated by discourses that emphasise equity, social justice and collective responsibility. Williams et al. (2013), however point to the potential difficulties involved in sustaining these concepts as compelling and legitimate counterpoints to the globalisation and corporatisation of education. Grumet and Yates (2011) argue that despite the widespread impact of 21st century rhetoric, some of the circulated phrases are in fact, empty of meaning and over simplistic. Tan, Chua and Goh (2015) claim that, in spite of their merits, there is insufficient research focusing on a critique of the dominant 21st century frameworks. They suggest that their ideological foundations are largely based on a view of education that emphasises individuality and the neoliberal premise that, learners are rational, autonomous, and tolerant, largely responsible for their own success or failure. According to Tan et al. (2015), this perspective assumes a worldview that is independent of cultural context and overlooks the role and impact of the family and community in education and socialisation. It seems that, while 21st century skills and frameworks are not irrelevant or unimportant, they need to be reconsidered in order to address their shortcomings. Instead of primarily promoting technical knowledge and rationality, centred on an individualist view of education, perhaps 21st century tertiary education should incorporate communitarian elements that recognise social contribution to education and the importance of democracy and shared moral values.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

According to Smith et al. (2009), particular educational practices validate, and reward certain forms of political, economic, and cultural capital, contributing to produce advantage and disadvantage. Policy, curricula, educators and learners themselves, are all implicated in the reproduction of contradictions and inequalities. Apple (2011) suggests that currently, education is often viewed as a relatively straightforward process that can be described and understood by universal generalisations and the idea that there is a correct and most effective way to teach and learn. The role of the educator is to apply 'best practice' in a step-by-step procedural form. Educational institutions often foster and reinforce these views, through the rhetoric of meritocracy and the use of testing, tracking and curricula. Freire (2000) referred to this educational approach as 'banking', characterised by depositing information into learners who are positioned as passive receivers of information. Within this pedagogical relationship, knowledge is regarded as static and pre-determined, possessed by an authority, and bestowed upon learners. Freire (2000) argued that this type of

relationship enables oppressors to regulate the way others receive the world. Within this paradigm, educational success is measured by how well learners adapt themselves and, those who are better educated are a better 'fit' for the world. According to Freire (2000) however, human capacity for investigation, critical thinking and choice can challenge and reimagine this view of education. In his view, human development is an incomplete, on-going process and this provides a foundation for forming a set of perspectives and practices related to the goals of democratic education and to learner's efforts to shape themselves and their realities. Freire suggests that individuals possess the power to transform their own oppression and that, although education is often employed as a political mechanism for control and domination, once transformed, it becomes the key to liberation and change. Freire's (2000) approach to education emphasises praxis, where ideas are combined with reflective practice to achieve social change.

Critical educators believe that emphasising the social character of knowledge can provide a basis for challenging the the dominant neoliberal ideologies that permeate tertiary education (Smith et al., 2009). Embracing a critical pedagogy holds tremendous potential for those intent on developing learners' capacity to critically engage with their world (Mott, Zupan, Debbane, & L*, 2015). In McLaren's (2007) view, critical pedagogy is not represented by a homogenous set of ideas, rather it is focused on the principle of transforming social inequality and characterised by questions of justice and democracy. It also acknowledges the role of power structures and cultural hegemony in shaping education and knowledge. Notions of critical pedagogy are continuously evolving and informed by multiple discourses, historical circumstances, theoretical insights, challenges and social situations (Kincheloe, 2008). It is therefore an empowering way of thinking and acting that examines the various contextual forces impacting the human condition. Giroux (2010) suggests that critical pedagogy, unlike best-practice models of teaching and learning, invites educators to help point the way towards a more socially just world in which discourses of critique and possibility, alongside the values of reason, freedom and equality, function to provide the basis for a more democratic society.

Critics however, point to the fact that, despite several decades of critical education, it does not seem to have achieved the level of expected change (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Cho, 2013). Cho (2013) suggests that one of the reasons for this could be that it is unclear exactly what is imagined by pedagogies of hope, possibility and transformation and what kind of society is envisaged as a result of social change. Cho believes that this is because the 'language of possibility' of critical pedagogy is not sufficiently articulated, and that its core concepts of equality, social justice and democracy are often presented in broad abstract terms. Although critical pedagogy criticises dominant instrumental rationality, there has been very little progress made in terms of incorporating its principles into more concrete forms within educational policy and curriculum.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE

According to Kincheloe (2008), critical pedagogy is based on a vision of justice and equality and is constructed on the belief that all education is inherently

political. Education that adopts a critical pedagogy therefore, involves pointing out flawed arguments, unsupported generalisations, and unexamined actions. Freire's (2000) view of critical pedagogy relies heavily upon the ethic of dialogic praxis. Within this problem-based approach, questions emerge via interaction between learners and educators necessitating the questioning of the world, and requiring dialogue between equal partners. From a Freirian perspective, it is essential that pedagogy avoids transmitting static forms of knowledge or encouraging adaptation to existing social norms and structures (Vassallo, 2013).

To understand how critical pedagogy can be applied to a vision of democratic education and implemented in everyday teaching practice, it is necessary to begin with a definition of its values (Goomansingh, 2009). For this purpose, Shor (1992) proposes a framework that projects the imperatives of democratic education and guides the interactions between educator and learners in a critical classroom. Shor's Agenda of Values provides a method for understanding how knowledge might be produced, and how pedagogical practices can be established that encourage democratic participation. The agenda is comprised of ten values that nurture a pedagogical environment, enabling learners to move from a position of complacency to a position of activism and requiring critical inquiry, dialogue and reflection (Goomansingh, 2009). These values can be applied in everyday classroom practice and include principles such as mutual construction of knowledge; learning material grounded in learner experience; reflection; sharing of perspectives and acknowledgement of differences; problem resolution and the development of a range of emotions (Shor, 1992).

Mott et al (2015) claim that adopting a critical pedagogy also necessitates strategising intervention in conventional models of education and suggest that this can be achieved by shifting the emphasis away from assessment and standardised testing towards challenging and supporting learners. This involves viewing them as individuals who are actively involved and contributing to the learning process. Mott et al (2015) also promote using the knowledge and experience that learners bring with them as a way of encouraging critique of a world they know, but from a new and unfamiliar vantage point. In this way, applying a critical pedagogy to teaching practice can result in the transformation of naïve understanding into deeper and more truthful comprehension, and in new ways of understanding and participating in the world. The challenge for tertiary educators therefore, is to encourage and support cultures of teaching and learning that reflect the principles of critical education, and take account of the challenges and contradictions within an unpredictable and irregular 21st century world.

CONCLUSION

Freire (2000) believed that education should be a liberating process, encouraging learners to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for critically analysing their place in society. In this way, they are enabled to understand assumptions and bias; learn how to challenge the status quo; and ultimately, transform their lives and the society in which they live. In the 21st century, tertiary education has an essential role to play in facilitating transformation and social change and an opportunity to help create a more

equal and just society. It appears however, that the relationship between the 21st century learner and the economy is a dominant theme of the current discourse and that the rhetoric of reform and 21st century education is increasingly linked to the corporatisation of the policy sector. It is not possible to escape the current influences of neoliberal ideologies on tertiary education, which, fuelled by globalisation, have left their mark on the tertiary education environment in New Zealand and many other Western countries. As a result, the emphasis in policy and curriculum is all too often focused on notions of human capital and skills to be mastered and performed.

Tertiary education has been situated in a competitive marketplace, characterised by privatisation and commercialisation that often promotes individual advancement, resulting in the abandonment of the broader notion of education for public good. Teaching and learning however, does not exist in a vacuum and learners, educators and tertiary providers are all implicated to some extent, in the perpetuation of unequal and unjust educational systems (Razack, 2001). It is not enough to simply continue to protest against current conditions or turn to solutions that have not worked in the past. Instead, it is necessary to look to evaluate and resist what is wrong, whilst also looking to the future and envisioning what could be (Ryan, 2011). Levidow (2002) claims that resistance can be strengthened by the development of alternative pedagogies, suggesting a way forward lies perhaps not in attempting to return to the less-than-perfect past, but in acknowledging and responding to ideological tensions. Despite the influences of market competition and standardised testing, and the preoccupation with quality assurance and accountability, opportunities still exist within tertiary education to invent new educational paradigms, capable of cultivating creativity, entrepreneurship and global competence (Zhao, 2015). The goal for educators concerned with democracy and social justice therefore, is to challenge current ideology through pedagogy that instils intellectual curiosity and an on-going willingness to learn. In this way, tertiary education can move beyond the transfer of knowledge and progress towards the possibility of transforming learning in the 21st century to include that which encourages personal, social and financial well-being and strengthens democratic participation and citizenship.

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