

The Neo-Liberal Assault on Democratic Learning

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Abstract

Neo-liberalism has dramatically shifted the context of contemporary society by dismantling the public mechanisms that previously protected individuals from unfettered capitalist principles. Public schools and universities have not escaped the influence of neo-liberal policies, as these institutions are currently more focused on human capital development than on the critical inquiry necessary for democratic citizenship. Universities, once a bastion of social critique and intellectual freedom, face increasing pressure to conform to the dictates of neo-liberal regimes and to a corporate hegemony. In this article and in response to this trend, we argue that educators must mount a more concerted resistance to the myriad of contemporary challenges to democratic citizenship education. We propose that restoring meaningful democratic dialogue in education requires revealing neo-liberal ideologies to students and reclaiming concepts such as lifelong learning, critical thinking and literacy as primary democratic learning practices.

Introduction

Neo-liberalism has dramatically shifted the context of contemporary society by dismantling the public mechanisms that previously protected individuals from the ravages of “capitalism with the gloves off.”¹ Within the sphere of education, public schools and universities have not escaped the influence of neo-liberal policies, as these institutions are focused more and more on human capital development and far less on critical inquiry into economic, social and political conditions. Once an untouchable bastion of intellectual freedom, universities face increasing pressure to conform to the dictates of neo-liberal regimes and a corporate hegemony that places profit over people.² In this article and in response to this trend, we argue that educators must mount a concerted resistance to the contemporary attack on democratic learning principles. We propose that meaningful democratic dialogue requires revealing neo-liberal ideologies to students and reclaiming such educational concepts as lifelong learning, critical thinking and literacy as primary democratic learning practices.

Neo-liberalism and Education

The hegemonic political and educational discourse suggests that neo-liberal logic is irrefutable and its principles are therefore naturalized to citizens within industrialized nations through a variety of fashions. Market logic is expressed ideologically and validated as ‘common sense’ by powerful institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Mike Harris, the former neo-liberal premier of Ontario, rolled to power in 1995 by asking citizens to join him in a “Common Sense Revolution” premised

on significant cuts in four areas: taxes; government spending; barriers to job creation (including workmen's compensation premiums and progressive labour legislation); and the size of government.³ Perhaps the foremost expert in the field of ideology and how it influences social thinking, Terry Eagleton, argues that making problematic and contestable assumptions part of *common sense* thinking is a familiar ideological strategy.⁴

Harris was especially effective in transforming the educational agenda to one focused on human capital development. For example, he threatened to tie university funding directly to the job placement success of students in respective subject areas. The value of education, then, was increasingly assessed in human capital rather than democratic or humanistic terms. Currently in the province of New Brunswick, the government is threatening to transform various universities into polytechnics with a focus on technical skills and other instrumental learning practices.⁵ Human capital theory, on which such reforms are based and consistent with the neo-liberal ideological tactic of structural naturalization, views education as an instrumental learning process where students acquire the skills necessary for labour market success. Schools and universities are regarded as social institutions whose primary purpose is preparing learners to assume their appropriate places in a pre-existing labour market context. Human capital theory begins with seemingly reasonable assumptions by suggesting that workers are more productive when they receive training, and this training translates into higher wages for the worker, increased profits for business, and supposedly creates a more productive and affluent society.

Although popular with neo-liberal policy developers in education, the presuppositions supporting human capital education are problematic. Human capital theory potentially misrepresents labour market realities to students by exaggerating the role of worker skill in determining employment outcomes. Vocational outcomes and opportunities are of course determined by a complex interaction between various subjective, political and economic forces acting in concert with individual capacity and educational achievement. An education entirely focused on preparing human capital for existing or projected labour market conditions is ideological and undemocratic since it undermines student consideration of transforming those conditions. Hence, human capital education as manifested in Mike Harris and Advantage New Brunswick education style policies threatens the traditional social, moral and democratic objectives of schooling by viewing students as passive objects being prepared for the inevitable effects of globalization. Human capital theory promotes the view that worker skill acquisition rather than structural adjustment is the solution to labour market problems.

The naturalization of neo-liberal ideology is widely evident in a range of contemporary curricula that typically describe present circumstances to students in terms that suggest either their inevitability or their desirability. Neo-liberal ideology removes the economic sphere from moral or social discussion by portraying these latter realms of discourse as dependent on the former. All other spheres of life are correspondingly designed to address the needs of the marketplace and any interference with market logic becomes unthinkable let alone possible. Habermas suggests that we are witnessing the complete invasion of what he describes as the *life world* by the creation of false needs and the rapid

decline of public spaces.⁶ The life world for Habermas consists of those fundamental human experiences and interactions that generate a sense of inner peace or individual well being and provides the necessary community space for democratic discussion.

Public education has not escaped the privatization consistent with neo-liberal policies as evidenced by the growth of the school choice movement in the USA. Adopting an unbridled faith in competition and micro-level accountability as the means to correct all possible social and economic ills, neo-liberal advocates demand that schools and teachers be held responsible for student academic fortunes through the development of standardized testing. As an ideological mechanism, these tests effectively mask the structural causes of academic underachievement and unemployment by viewing educational problems as individual failures.⁷ With complete disregard for resource inequity, economic disparity and other structural impediments to academic achievement, the belief developed that schools could be improved by creating a parallel school system to compete with the public variety.

In spite of their traditional role as the gatekeepers of intellectual freedom, universities have not escaped the drift toward human capital preparation and other instrumental demands of the marketplace. Faced with huge public financing reductions, universities are increasingly focused on technical training rather than on creating informed and engaged democratic citizens.⁸ Concordia University, for example, is marketed under the slogan “real education for the real world,” a mantra that effectively reduces learning to social efficiency precepts by implying there is a real social world beyond that shaped by human agency and decision-making. In the USA, a significant number of research chairs are entirely corporate sponsored with the attending obligation to direct research agendas toward studies that pay corporate dividends.

Increasingly, universities view their relationship with students within a business model framework with students often described as clients or customers of the university rather than as members of a scholarly community with rights and responsibilities to share in and shape community life. A recent article appearing in a University of Toronto publication extolled that institution’s new focus on students as “customers” who deserved good service as a smart move not for delivering quality education but for nurturing long term alumni loyalty — and, of course, contributions.⁹ This commodification of education not only appears in marketing and customer service campaigns directed at students, parents and alumni, but in an increasing focus on universities as providers of commodities (under the guise of credentials) rather than education. Almost forty years ago social critic Ivan Illich argued that Western educational institutions had substituted credentialing for educating, an observation even more salient today.¹⁰

The reduction of public funding for universities creates intense competition between faculty for available private and public grants. The ability to attract funding into the university is now typically viewed as a fundamental tenure requirement. The research funded by these grants often poses little challenge to the neo-liberal structure because it either neglects society as a primary unit of analysis or manifestly embraces prevailing human capital objectives. The focus of this research is often grounded far more in the

idea of social and economic utility than in fostering democratic critique. The idea that a university experience is about intellectual growth, social debate and democratic dialogue has been largely usurped by the neo-liberal objectives of customer service, credentializing, technical training and instrumental learning. In the current university milieu, faculty are often reduced from their democratic role of social critic to that of entrepreneurial researcher or clerical proletariat labour.¹¹

An education system designed to respond to the needs of the marketplace predictably appears radically different from one focused on preparing students for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in the USA, for example, does not include a single reference to either democracy or democratic citizenship.¹² The NCLB Act advances neo-liberal assumptions through its advocacy of instrumental research practices that ensure learning programs are based on empirical research drawing on observation and experiment. By focusing on scientism the social structure of opportunity as a unit of research analysis is undermined, as is the structural changes such research might precipitate.

Neo-liberal culture is naturalized to students in public and higher education as an unchangeable social reality rather than critiqued as an ideological movement imposed by special corporate interests on citizens of industrialized democratic societies. Outside the strictures of the global market, education in the neo-liberal order conveys to students there are simply no longer any meaningful choices to be made. Throughout contemporary career education curricula in particular, and in a variety of ideologically manipulative ways, students are expected to prepare for an uncertain occupational future and are discursively convinced that such conditions are beyond the scope of their own political agency. Pedagogical tools of social critique such as critical thinking, lifelong learning and literacy are all influenced by the neo-liberal shift toward instrumental instruction. As a result, schools fail to prepare students as democratic citizens who possess the necessary understanding and dispositions to decide politically between various social possibilities. Instead, students are portrayed as mere objects in history and inculcated with a consumer-driven worldview devoid of imagination, hope or alternative social visions.

Exposing Neo-liberal Ideology

A pedagogical feature too often lacking in educational preparation for democratic citizenship is instruction that provides students with a basic understanding of how ideology shapes individual and cultural consciousness. If our students are expected to make autonomous and democratic political choices about society, then providing them with understanding about the mechanisms of ideology and *false consciousness* becomes a pivotal education objective. To remedy the present lack of attention schools pay to this problem, the term *ideology* should be introduced to students relatively early to empower them with a concept that effectively names and exposes the manipulative forces in their culture. Ideology, especially in the current era of modern media and technological invasion, has a potentially profound and lasting impact on student consciousness that may impede their ability for autonomous preference formation. Without providing students

some opportunity to examine the impact of ideology on consciousness shaping, the hope of achieving a meaningful, or what Apple and Aasen describe as a *thick democracy*, is seriously undermined.¹³

One effective pedagogical approach to open up student consideration of the ideologies that underlie contemporary Western society is to present historical or contemporary alternatives. Feminist scholars have provided insightful critiques of liberal and formal democratic conceptions of citizenship and democracy.¹⁴ As well, considerable body of academic scholarship on citizenship emerging from Asia challenges the privileging of individuals over communities and proposes alternative social and economic frameworks other than neo-liberalism for political and social organization in democratic societies.¹⁵ Either or both of these frameworks could provide valuable education strategies for opening up the taken-for-granted nature of existing social, economic, labour market and working conditions.

Consistent with the neo-liberal assumptions propelling reform in education many organizations influencing contemporary education policy development advance a human capital construct of lifelong learning designed to address unstable labour market conditions.¹⁶ Contemporary labour market conditions generally include recurrent occupational displacement and instability that combine to undermine the job security of workers. The human capital construct of lifelong learning is designed to ensure that students, as future workers, passively accept the occupational uncertainty they will inevitably confront in the new global economic order. For example, the World Bank Group endorses the following concept of lifelong learning:

In the 21st century, workers need to be lifelong learners, adapting continuously to changed opportunities and to the labor market demands of the knowledge economy. Lifelong learning is more than education and training beyond formal schooling. A comprehensive programme of lifelong-learning education for dynamic economies, within the context of the overall development framework of each country, encompasses all levels.¹⁷

From this perspective, lifelong learning involves the constant upgrading of skills to ensure workers remain responsive to contemporary labour market demands. By blurring the distinction between the constructed nature of society and natural reality, and ignoring the crucial distinction between natural facts and social facts, this discourse conveys to students that their role is simply preparing for an inevitable and unstable future rather than engaging with or democratically transforming the political, economic and social landscapes.¹⁸

The human capital discourse portraying lifelong learning as a labour market adjustment strategy undermines the ability of students to act as democratic agents of social change. Democratic forms of pedagogy view humans and society as unfinished, subject to continual evaluation and transformation. As subjects in history, students, respected as lifelong learners, have a right to influence occupational conditions and, in the process, create a more just, stable and caring social experience. From a democratic perspective,

we should no longer ask our students to accept an ahistorical view of the world that presents social reality and labour market conditions as fixed and unchangeable and reduces their role to social adaptation.¹⁹

The area of literacy education represents another example where the instrumental assumptions of neo-liberal ideology dominate the curriculum. The 1998 Ontario Secondary Schools Detailed Discussion Document issued by the Ministry of Education explored several possible purposes for education that eventually precipitated large-scale curricular reform in the province. These purposes range from preparing students for the workforce to preparing students as reflective individuals and engaged democratic citizens. The Ontario Ministry of Education concluded that meeting both of these objectives required enhancing the literacy “skills” of students. In a ministry brochure titled *Literacy in Ontario: The Rewards are for Life*, and in contradiction to the democratic literacy goals identified above, the functionalist assumptions supporting the ministry’s vision of literacy are revealed: “Literacy skills are needed every day — at work, at home, at school, in the community. These skills help people to take part in further education and training, as well as to find and keep jobs.”²⁰ The emphasis on simply encoding textual messages for instrumental workplace application without considering the broader social context from which that information emerges undermines the democratic participation of learners by ignoring their role as rational agents in social construction.²¹

The political perspective represented in many of the current literacy practices in the province of Ontario and elsewhere reveals a monolithic neo-liberal agenda that denies students access to alternative worldviews. This agenda interferes with the fundamental democratic right of students to act as political agents of social reconstruction by transforming the social, economic and labour market circumstances they confront. Students are depicted by literacy imperatives as objects of, rather than subjects in, the construction of social reality. Freire explains how critical forms of literacy learning counteract this type of politically paralyzing and decidedly undemocratic education: “In problem-posing education, [students] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”²² In critical literacy, students learn to give democratic voice to the vocational and social challenges they presently confront and develop a deep understanding that social change is a real possibility. This understanding is central to the democratic learning advocated by Freire who “taught us that, for social transformation to take place, it is important for students to understand and give voice to their personal struggles.”²³

Throughout Ontario career education imperatives, students presently learn to view and name the world through a corporate-dominated discourse that conveys particular values, assumptions and expectations. Alternatively, the primary objective of critical literacy in democratic education is heightening student awareness on how discourse influences our view of social reality. Apple describes this alternate conception as “critical literacy, powerful literacy, political literacy which enables the growth of genuine understandings and control of all the spheres of social life in which we participate.”²⁴

Even in the area of critical thinking, current curriculum constructs tend toward an instrumental reasoning approach that ignores the social and economic context as a primary unit of analysis. Critical thinking is widely portrayed as a problem-solving strategy to generate technical solutions within a naturalized market economy system. Five Steps to Better Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making, for example, a business resource created for teachers, emphasizes the daily practical challenges that workers might expect to confront: “Some problems are big and unmistakable, such as the failure of an air freight delivery service to get packages to customers on time. Other problems may be continuing annoyances, such as regularly running out of toner for an office copy machine.”²⁵

Business education reflects a technical rationality focus more directly by suggesting that “Critical thinking is an important aspect of all courses. Instruction should include opportunities for students to justify positions on issues and to apply economic and business principles to particular circumstances.”²⁶ The Iowa City Community School District Career/Business Education high school curriculum describes problem solving as “an employability skill required by employers.”²⁷ The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Division of Vocational and Adult Education maintain that critical thinking skills help students “solve everyday, practical problems.”²⁸

These critical thinking constructs promote technical rationality and instrumental reasoning by encouraging students to address problems from a limited perspective that ignores wider workplace, labor market, and socio-economic issues. When students are tacitly or openly discouraged from engaging the social and economic forces shaping contemporary experience, their democratic right to participate in directing these forces is correspondingly undermined. Indeed, the moral imperatives of education within a democratic society require students to be provided with the necessary knowledge and dispositions to make informed choices about current political and social conditions, and entertain possible alternatives to improve these conditions.²⁹

We contend that education adopting a critical thinking approach based on democratic learning pursues the following principles of inquiry:

- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning considers the social and economic context a legitimate unit of analysis;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning encourages the political engagement of students in shaping the conditions that determine their social and political lives;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning places neo-liberalism, or any other ideology, in a historical context that promotes student understanding of society as a dynamic and evolving process;
- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning provides students with alternative viewpoints on possible social and economic structures; and

- Critical thinking that respects democratic learning fosters critical dispositions among students by providing continuous opportunities for social, economic and political critique.²⁹

Conclusion

We hope that this article provides teachers at various levels with the knowledge, understanding, strategies and incentive to counter the neo-liberal policies that threaten to turn our remaining public spaces in education into realms of instrumental human capital preparation. As educators we must fully appreciate our inter-generational obligation to students and to future citizens, and work to protect the rapidly fading ideals that lie at the heart of democratic life. We believe the choice before us is a relatively simple but critically important one for the future of our democratic societies: Do we create students as future citizens who view themselves as mere objects in history, or do we create learners who view themselves as dynamic political agents of personal and social improvement? From an educational perspective that respects the principles of democratic learning and intellectual freedom, the answer is abundantly clear and our charge as educators exceptionally compelling.

Notes

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