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Reconsidering Educational Consumerism

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Abstract

Ongoing concerns about student debt, operational transparency, and public accountability have accelerated tendencies to model education after the values prized by free-market economics. This model prioritizes efficiency and customer satisfaction while treating education as a commodity instrumental for personal gain. Questionable equivalences between marketplace commerce and education render consumerism insufficient as a description or as an ideal. Adopting this framework frays the moral fabric of education and shortchanges students by configuring them as consumers to placate rather than characters to build.

Introduction [1]

The encroachment of a market mentality into education and other domains continues unabated even amid the backwash of the worldwide economic crisis. "The reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms is one of the most significant developments of our time" (Sandel, 2012, p. 7). More than a decade ago, Naomi Klein (1999) bemoaned the creeping consumerism within higher education, characterized by disengaged students who adopt a "mall mentality" of casually "cruising" curricular and co-curricular offerings (p. 98). She attributed this development to ongoing and intensifying commercial encroachments into a supposedly pristine institutional culture of "quasi-sacred spaces" untarnished by corporate incursions. Klein failed to notice a more persistent and permanent commercial colonization of education: adoption of a market-based, consumer-driven philosophy to guide educational practice.

This essay explores the implications that market-based norms, especially commodification of knowledge and rendering students as consumers, have for educational theory and practice. Analysis of prevalent market-derived concepts that purportedly describe higher education reveals a problematic conception of educational processes and participants. First, treating education as a commodity overlooks the value of intellectual challenge and exploration by reducing knowledge to quantifiable, job-oriented results. Second, configuring students as consumers prioritizes

immediate satisfaction over rigor and enduring values. Finally, the amoral marketplace contrasts with the ethic of mutual care that lies at the core of responsible citizenry.

Metaphor Analysis

Metaphors map the course of cognitive approaches toward the phenomena they describe. Kenneth Burke (1969) identified metaphor as a “master trope,” noting how metaphor defines a perspective on reality. Although Aristotle (trans. 1924) contended that “the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor” (1459a.5), metaphors too often master those who employ them. This master trope easily can master thought, especially when a metaphor is adopted uncritically. Indeed, “metaphors undoubtedly stand as an essential tool for investigating our understanding and conception of education with its many components,” since the choice of metaphors crystallizes what we consider essential to the educational process (Kesen, 2010, p. 109).

When firmly rooted, metaphors can delimit the terms of discussion. Once a metaphorically sustained frame of reference becomes reified, it can calcify discourse by disqualifying alternative standpoints that diverge from the metaphoric frame. Thus, if students *are* consumers and their education *is* a product designed to maximize their competitive ranking in the global market, then the non-economic aspects of education could dwindle into irrelevance because they do not sustain the metaphoric frame. The adoption of economically inspired terminology gives the impression that these terms provide sufficient conceptual richness to describe and guide educational practice.

Commodification of Education

A market-infused approach to education treats knowledge as a commodity whose exchange value is measured crudely by comparing the cost of acquiring a degree (tangible certification of “product” acquisition) with the financial earnings the degree supposedly enables. Casting aside the causal fallacies involved in assuming a degree provides a sufficient condition for employment, consider the values such an approach entails.

Some of the impetus for commodification comes from administrators and non-academic governing bodies who treat universities as irresponsible, profligate institutions that must be managed. Such insidious suspicion fertilizes what Tuchman (2009) calls an “audit culture,” a mechanical fulfillment of checklists and criteria without more fundamental reflection on how these measures contribute to the social and intellectual enrichment of the students. The ultimate objective of pleasing the students and their families—conceived as consumers—gives priority to the most concrete, quantifiable results: employment supplants enlightenment. The university’s mission narrows to job training rather than expanding the mind to explore possibilities, solve problems, and find creative expression beyond and across professional roles bounded by job descriptions.

This mentality is encouraged by administrators who conceive and conduct university operations as if they primarily were vocational centers for finding jobs, overlooking or suppressing a view of the university as a developmental center for finding self, connecting with others, and discovering new ideas (Ginsberg, 2011). The contrast between training for a predefined job and discovering what has not been determined encapsulates how some policymakers bifurcate practical versus intellectual labor. This narrow vision of education, caricaturing academics as

irrelevant effects, plays especially well amid moribund economies that harbor residual resentment toward the decline of blue-collar employment.

Classifying education as a commodity relies on several assumptions, each carrying significant implications for educational philosophy and practice. First, commodification restricts education's task to measurable and often short-term financial yields. The value of knowledge becomes purely instrumental, a means to employment. The type of person who emerges from higher education becomes relevant only to the extent that it might affect employability. Educating the whole person amounts to a mere rhetorical flourish in an environment wherein the person is reduced to a functionary in the workplace—or, more accurately, to a statistic that might reduce a state's unemployment rate.

Second, the very concept of commodification encourages catering to students, pleasing them in the short term by minimizing challenges rather than equipping them for the long term to persevere in solving complex problems. Etymologically, “commodify” derives from the Latin term meaning “convenience,” as in “commodious.” What kind of preparation for life's challenges does an education provide that measures quality primarily by the degree of ease and convenience?

Lamentations notwithstanding, the commodification of higher education does serve some useful purposes. It calls attention to various stakeholders—administrators, parents, community members, donors, alumni, and others—often excluded or ignored by standard pedagogical practice (Doherty, 1997). One reason the transactional framework enjoys ascendancy in difficult economic times is that it places a premium on assessment, usually rendered as “accountability” (itself a term with kinship to financial transactions). Consequently, understanding the mindset and mastering the discourse of commodification enable academic institutions to collect and present data that can quantify their accomplishments and justify their existence. Implemented judiciously, a consumer-focused approach can improve responsiveness to students, identify areas to improve services, and clarify how resources get allocated (Maguad, 2007). Fundamental problems, however, arise from prioritizing the consumer as the central or most desirable role for students.

Students as Consumers

As financial resources continue to shrink, virtually all aspects of higher education are increasingly embedded in the discursive realm of consumerism. This familiar situation has received ample scholarly attention (Cheney, McMillan, & Schwartzman, 1997; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Maguad, 2007; McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Schwartzman, 1995, 2010; Schwartzman & Phelps, 2002). Students are rendered as consumers, with the metaphor becoming reified as the imperative to treat students not *as if* they were consumers, but *as* consumers. The educational process is understood as analogous to a commercial transaction: students pay tuition and in return receive knowledge, skills, and a degree certifying qualification for a vocation.

The transactional orientation treats the consumer's desires as *ipso facto* correct. The primary mission of the consumer-focused model is to “delight the customer” by exceeding expectations (Eagle & Brennan, 2007, p. 45). Consumerism has no interest in customers engaging in self-

reflection to question or alter their desires. Although students' desires may be inchoate or grounded only in ephemeral whims, consumer-centered education must respect and fulfill them (Love, 2008). The labor the consumer contributes to education remains unclear, rendering the educational experience a unidirectional process whereby the educational institutions (and, by extension, the educators) become mechanisms for pleasing the customer.

One might argue that the consumer metaphor serves a productive purpose by empowering students and thus motivating them to assert greater control over their own education. A cadre of concerned consumers could actually improve educational quality much as consumer watchdogs or labor unions monitor corporations to assure quality and safety. Despite the ample scholarly analysis devoted to consumerism in higher education, rarely does research critically address the type of consumer that the market mentality produces.

In education, the minimalist consumer develops early. Given free choice, even students in elementary school may prefer to minimize intellectual challenge and risk, selecting the path of least effort. These young students “may reject approaches that emphasise intellectual quality in favour of repetitive, non-challenging and educationally debilitating work because, although not engaging intellectually, they are able to ‘do’ the task, fill in the worksheet, keep busy and stay out of trouble” (Zammit, 2011, p. 206). Retreating from rigor, students remain in their intellectual comfort zone of less demanding activities. Within the consumer feedback model, lack of intellectual rigor becomes self-perpetuating. If students demand minimal intellectual challenge, then customer satisfaction requires that just as little be offered. What students desire may not equip them with what they need.

In fairness, few incoming college students have been prepared to exercise critical discernment as consumers in the educational marketplace. Lacking explicit guidance or background in what constitutes educational quality, students may be uninformed, immature consumers whose preferences should not serve as the primary guide for educational practice (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 171). The self-directed learning patterns that college students exhibit belie the behaviors of discerning consumers. “There are many reasons instead to expect students as consumers to focus on receiving services that will allow them, as effortlessly and comfortably as possible, to attain valuable educational credentials that can be exchanged for later labor market success” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 17). After all, if educational institutions should place a premium on convenience, then why would students not also prioritize it as their cardinal virtue?

Cultivation of consumerism may carry long-term, unintended consequences for educational institutions. Bauman (2007) notes that consumerism fosters a throwaway culture, wherein anything that causes dissatisfaction simply gets discarded and replaced by something more pleasant. Such quick willingness to abandon whatever induces momentary displeasure aptly describes the readiness of students to withdraw from a course (or worse, simply vanish without officially withdrawing) when faced with a difficult assignment. Bauman's link of consumerism with hedonistic whims may translate into a lack of long-term commitment to a college or university after an education has been purchased and provided. Bauman (2007) claims, “Consumers are not expected to swear loyalty to the objects they obtain with the intention to consume” (p. 21). Ethnographic investigations of college student life confirm the low level of communal identification and lack of deep institutional allegiance—at least outside of sporting

events (Nathan, 2005). Lacking loyalty to any long-term value of education aside from its instrumental role in securing a job, students also would have little reason to maintain deep fidelity to an educational institution (Arum & Roksa, 2011). If education is reducible to a financial transaction, then the relationship between buyer and seller terminates at the point of sale. This lack of long-term relational investment raises serious questions about the extent that a market-centered view of education suffices to sustain financial commitments to the institution when students become alumni.

Efficiency and Efficacy

The economic template for education prizes efficiency. Applied to mechanistic institutional operations such as wait times for services such as meals or financial aid, efficiency delivers the desired outcome to more people in less time. The ethic of efficiency operates differently within the pedagogical process. Consumers also want to maximize efficiency, and they can achieve it by satisficing: exerting just enough effort to acquire the desired result. Some evidence links the consumerist mentality of entitlement with student tendencies to take shortcuts, including academic dishonesty, to increase the ratio of results to the effort expended (Harrison & Risler, 2015).

Critics such as Ritzer (1996) observe that educational efficiency and quality are not coextensive. He analogizes that fast foods might qualify as efficient, but they sacrifice nutritional value.

Constant adaptations to consumer demands, regardless of their rationale or merit, can prove to be a costly, inefficient proposition. Paradoxically, the uncritical adaptation to students' consumer-oriented preferences may actually restrict student access to education. As conspicuous consumers, students and their families are drawn to select and most prize the flashiest, most publicly observable aspects of education as status symbols (Veblen, 1976). One study found that almost three quarters of college students identify physical facilities as the primary or a major factor in their matriculation decision (Reynolds, 2007). College campus tours focus on residence halls, recreation centers, and athletic stadiums for good reason: they offer the most tangible markers of institutional identity. Following the dictum of pleasing the customer, enormous sums flow into construction of buildings and amenities. These ever-escalating competitive pressures force continual and expensive upgrades—not when needed, but when demanded by student-customers to keep pace with rising expectations for entertainment, comfort, and convenience. As a consequence, the rising educational expenses to accommodate rising consumer expectations may price students and their families out of the education market (Woodson, 2013).

Care-free Consumers or Responsible Citizens?

Cornel West (2005) voices concern about the predominance of “free market fundamentalism,” the unbridled faith in capitalistic practices as optimal solutions for all social problems. West's reservations about free market fundamentalism lie primarily with its uncritical adoption of capitalistic wealth—especially conspicuous consumption—as a substitute for “deep democracy.” This deep democracy contrasts with acquisition and wealth for their own sake. Instead, deep democracy relies on the collective will of the populace to embrace values that maximize the ability of everyone to pursue their utmost potential as unique individuals (West, 2005). Free market fundamentalism casts social relationships as zero-sum competitions. Deep democracy fosters mutual obligations to improve the common lot of humanity. Free market fundamentalism

measures success by its production of wealth: the more, the better—regardless of its distribution. Deep democracy measures success by how far the lowest classes, the most oppressed, and the most marginalized become centrally involved in crafting the future of their society. Free market fundamentalism measures accomplishment by the thickness of one’s wallet. Deep democracy assesses achievement by a different yardstick: the depth of commitment to one another. Deep democracy places the public good above personal gratification.

Arum and Roksa’s most recent (2014) research, focusing on student transitions from college to career, acknowledges that a narrowly vocational view of education has become prevalent if not dominant. Treated as an instrument one purchases for career advancement, the role of education in contributing to civic engagement and responsibility has waned. The perception of education “as a consumer good and as a tool to improve one’s lot in the occupational hierarchy” has diminished “other purposes of education, including that of preparing citizens for participation in a democratic society” (Arum & Roksa, 2014, p. 100). This connection between education and active citizenry long predates classification of education as a commodity serving student-consumers. At the dawn of the twentieth century, sociologist Lester Ward contended that education serves the societal interest at large, not a particular economic interest. “Moreover, education is the one kind of human enterprise that cannot be brought under the action of the economic law of supply and demand. It cannot be conducted on business principles” (Ward, 1903, p. 575). Reconfigured as an investment in society rather than a cost to society, the quality of education cannot be reduced to economic metrics alone (such as efficiency measures).

The richest democracy may not be the wealthiest, but the one that enriches values—such as mutual caring and respect—that carry no price tags. Inducing people to care about each other or building a more civil, respectful world simply does not occupy a necessary place in the value system of consumerist culture (Bauman, 2008, 2009). Any sense of care attendant to consumerism has a purely instrumental role of caring about another’s desires in order to satisfy them for some ulterior purpose usually related to bolstering profits or reputation.

Consumer-Producer Versus Student-Teacher Relationships

Reconceptualizing the student-teacher relationship as a transaction between consumer and producer yields problematic consequences. In many ways, the buyer-seller concept offers an impoverished and morally ambiguous perspective on education. As Bauman (2009) attests, consumerism simply remains silent on the means one uses to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace.

Behavioral economics research on the distinction between social norms and market norms bears directly on the preferred type of relationships in educational environments. Social norms refer to the practices that build solid interpersonal relationships: reciprocity, trust, courtesy, loyalty, and the like. Market norms denote the rules governing commercial exchange: maximizing value, settling on how much something is worth, outmaneuvering competitors, and similar strategies. Ariely (2010) summarizes the findings: “Moreover, introducing market norms into social exchanges...violates the social norms and hurts the relationships” (pp. 83-84). Social norms guiding responsible citizenship include skills such as learning to collaborate, discovering how to critique ideas positions without attacking their authors, building appreciation for differences in opinions and customs, and practicing generosity. Market norms cultivate an atmosphere of

amoral competition and mutual suspicion, which explains the motto of commerce: caveat emptor.

These findings raise an intriguing possibility. Perhaps the quality of education would improve more by reinvigorating its role in fostering social cohesion than by magnifying the economic factors and making them the central focus. Ariely (2010) continues: “If corporations started thinking in terms of social norms, they would realize that these norms build loyalty and—more important—make people want to extend themselves to the degree that corporations need today: to be flexible, concerned, and willing to pitch in. That’s what a social relationship delivers” (p. 91). *Homo economicus* behaves entirely as a calculating machine, weighing net costs against net benefits in rendering decisions. A defining mark of a teacher is the willingness to invest in the well-being of students without regard for personal reward, driven by every student’s inherent value instead of their market worth.

Conclusion

Free market fundamentalism poses dangers apart from capitalism per se. Capitalism is not antithetical to values, although it is not coextensive with democracy. The reservations about free market fundamentalism stem as much from its reductionist character as from its chimera of a fair and impartial economic system.

The limitations of a market-centered approach to education become apparent when the commodified aspects of education are treated as sufficient descriptions of pedagogical processes and objectives. “Subjecting a public good like education to commercial logic is generally disastrous,” warns Robert McChesney (2013, p. 52), who argues that market-based values are fundamentally incompatible with education. His attack on commercial values stems from deeper suspicions about the logic and desirability of capitalistic norms for education. First, he notes that the marketplace provides insufficient modes to express the values of education, which cannot and should not be reduced to the financially measured exchange value of knowledge as sheer profit potential. Second, McChesney (2013) classifies education as a “cooperative public service” (p. 93) rather than a profit-seeking enterprise. As a public service, education attempts to maximize opportunities and fulfill the potential of every student even if such efforts prove inefficient. This ability—indeed, mandate—to transcend the values of efficiency and financial profit-seeking distinguish education from business.

Endnote

This article builds on previous work discussing education as a marketable commodity, as discussed in Schwartzman, R. (2013). Consequences of commodifying education. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 17(3), 41-46.

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