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"Breaking the cycle of instrumentalism": implications for pedagogy, learning and the employability of Business graduates from New Universities.

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Background

The Government's 10-15yr Framework, "Higher Ambitions" (DBIS 2009), for the future of Higher Education reaffirms its previous policies of accelerating widening participation and leveraging greater alignment between University "output" and the needs of the knowledge economy. The Framework is premised on the instrumentalist assumption that the core purpose of Universities is to provide the skills and research bases to supply employers with the resources required to compete in global markets. The manifestation of these policies can be seen most vividly in the New Universities (post 1992) where vocationalism is the focus of University marketing strategies and vocational degrees dominate the curriculum (Symes and McIntyre 2002).

However, paradoxically perhaps, the evidence from my research into graduate recruitment, confirms the low probability of Business graduates from the New Universities (post 1992) gaining access to traditional middle class professional occupations within the UK corporate sector (Wilton 2007).

Research Questions

The four main areas of enquiry are: the linkage between pedagogy and student attitudes to learning in New University Business Schools; the attitudes of leading UK Advertising agencies to the recruitment of Business graduates; the compatibility of Business School pedagogy with the graduate recruitment models deployed by leading UK Advertising agencies and lastly, the potential for relational pedagogy to develop learning capacities and dispositions in undergraduate Business students.

Methods

The literature on pedagogy and student engagement in Higher Education was extensively reviewed. Primary data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with recruitment managers of nine leading Advertising agencies (January to March 2009), and a survey of first year Business School undergraduates on their motivations for choosing their degree (October 2009).

Frame

Explanations for the limited access of graduates to traditional professional occupations include the oversupply of graduates (Brown and Hesketh 2004), cultural capital deficit (Bourdieu 1977) and the embedded organisational cultures of employers who favour candidates from the "old" universities (Benady 2009). This paper focuses on how technical-rationalist pedagogy in Business degrees can inhibit student development by disconnecting them from learning opportunities (Mann 2001) and promoting instrumentalism. Student instrumentalism is a means-end paradigm, characterised by traits such as: high levels of plagiarism; an adversarial attitude to tutors in the assessment process and confinement of engagement with learning activity to the perceived requirements of summative assessment, often at a surface level (Molesworth et al 2009). In other words, student instrumentalism is the antithesis of the individual capacities and dispositions required to compete in the graduate employment market (Billet 2009).

I would contend that a "cycle of instrumentalism" can be perpetuated by a technical-rationalist pedagogy which, itself, is instrumentalist. An instrumentalist pedagogy is premised on a limited model of disseminating and testing propositional knowledge. This is exemplified by learning outcomes conceptualised as notional simulations of managerial operational techniques or "skills" and

transmission models of teaching which promote rote learning and memorisation of basic propositional knowledge, within a paradigm of non-contestation (Rowland 2003).

Relational pedagogy represents a radical alternative approach through pedagogical practices which hold the potential to emancipate student learning. The essence of this approach is the development of dispositional knowledge (Billet 2009, Barnett 2009) in the context of the New University Business School and professional workplace settings by:

- Developing student capacities for agency, adaptation and criticality in the context of uncertain and complex University and work-based challenges.
- Exploring the relationship between theory and practice through experiential learning in the enactment of work-based activities.
- Deepening personal epistemology through the collaborative exploration of the relationship between tutors, learners and knowledge generation processes.
- Promoting intrinsic motivation for learning by aligning learning processes with individual student experiences, purposes and interests.
- Creating the possibility for personal transformation by developing the dispositions and qualities required of lifelong learners and employees.

Research findings

The key findings can be summarised as follows: for year 1 undergraduate Business students, the dominant motivation for choosing their degree is their perception that it will lead to a professional career. Undergraduate Business students frequently place little intrinsic value on learning but focus sharply on their degree classification. The consensus amongst leading UK Advertising agencies is that business graduates are less attractive than non-business graduates as potential employees. Lastly, relational pedagogy appears to offer the possibility of breaking the cycle of instrumentalism found in UK Business Schools by developing the dispositions and qualities required for both graduate employment and life-long learning.

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