Being educated in the twenty first century: An exploration

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Abstract

The question ‘When am I educated?’ had a fairly simple answer in the modern era. The minimum requirement was a degree from one of the ‘recognised’ universities of the world, and the degree initiated the individual into the different ‘official’ canons of knowledge. The majority of those canons were Western in origin and represented Education (with a capital ‘E’). Knowledge production and legitimisation were the sole mandate of universities and institutions of higher learning. In the postmodern era being considered ‘educated’ has changed dramatically. Universities are no longer the only producers or legitimisers of knowledge; the canons of knowledge themselves are contested. Industry demands ‘just in time’ learning and certification, while lifelong learning as transitional learning celebrates ‘unofficial’ and informal knowledge production. Lifelong learning furthermore includes valuing interdependency and learning in communities within the broader project of individuation. Should the question be ‘Who owns or will produce what type of knowledge?’ or ‘Who will sanction the knowledge produced or owned and determine the relevance thereof?’

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, when a man asked his future parents-in-law their permission to marry their daughter, one of their first questions was: ‘Do you have papers?’ (meaning: ‘What is your level of education?’). The importance and norms behind the notion of ‘being educated’ were contained in this question. Without papers you did not have cultural and social capital. On the other hand, if you were in the fortunate position to have ‘papers’, the world lay at your feet. Since then, things have changed.

Today the amount of people ‘with papers’ is more than at any other time in the history of humankind. And yet, we are no longer sure whether ‘having papers’
necessarily makes one an ‘educated’ person. To the contrary, the worst atrocities in the history of humankind were most probably committed by people ‘with papers’. Furthermore, certain papers are considered of more worth than others, depending on who issued them. And in some countries you can buy whatever paper you want.

Postmodernity or late modernity is often celebrated as the age in which borders have become meaningless and education and technology (and power) are readily available to everyone on the planet. Can one assume that this borderlessness has resulted in equal access to resources, the eradication of poverty, and a just and compassionate society?

Not quite. Although the changes of the last odd 100 years have been vast and have taken place at an unprecedented pace, these changes have not realised the dreams mentioned above. To the contrary, not since the Middle Ages have so many people suffered from dismal poverty and disease. The Earth and her resources have been mercilessly plundered in past decades and there is a growing concern that things cannot and should not be allowed to continue unabated. In the midst of the above, the enchantment of consumption is heralded as the saviour of the 21st century. Welcome to the age of ‘Me Inc’.

In this article we will explore the implications of late modernity on knowledge and knowledge production, and the role of higher education in this changed scenario. This article therefore firstly explores the macro socio-economic and cultural contexts, and the effects thereof, on epistemologies of knowledge and knowledge production. The second part of this article investigates new producers of knowledge, new epistemologies and new ways of seeing learning. The final part of this article provides some tentative pointers as to what ‘being educated’ could mean in the 21st century.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF LATE MODERNITY

The market, organisations and workplace for ordinary employees changed dramatically in the past number of years. ‘Markets for goods and services have become volatile and fragmented, with customised design and specialised market niches displacing established forms of Fordist mass production for mass markets’ (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997, 2). The results have been flatter management structures and the growth of team work. Quality assurance procedures and criteria dominate strategy and there has been a decline of the unions’ centralised bargaining power. Due to a growing demand for a multi-skilled workforce, the workplace has become a site of learning. Corporate capital has become more mobile than ever and has also resulted in a very mobile work force (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997, 2). Transnational capital moves wherever markets and cheap means of production are; communication and information technologies create a mobility of capital and information of unprecedented proportions.

The above are the positives. The changes have also been documented to have negative effects. Labour markets are increasingly fragmented and unequal, where
those without skills, cultural capital, access to information or market power can usually expect only a ‘living and working existence on the margins’ (Bauman 1998). Despite the dynamism and flexibility of the markets, goods are not distributed according to need and the vulnerable are not protected. Not everyone is mobile and capital is selfishly mobile. In the midst of this, adult education has become a driving force to sustain the present socio-economic context (Bauman 1998; Usher et al. 1997).

Within this context the workplace is no longer a place of job security and stability. To the contrary, workplaces have become flexible places ‘where flexible workers (responsive, adaptive, transferable), flexible structures (insecure, fluid, adaptive to consumer demand and changing markets), flexible pay (increasingly contractual) and consequently flexible learning are assumed to ensure organisational competitiveness’. In such workplaces employees are becoming ‘enterprising selves’ who are ‘active, self-responsible, self-reflexive constructors of their own work capacities, biographies and success’ (Fenwick 2000, 2).

This fluidness also results in the ‘blurred boundaries between employees’ private spaces of self and soul and the turmoil of an organisation’s hungry growth’ (Fenwick 2000, 3). A large number of employees are taking the responsibility to establish their own livelihood, realise their own dreams and take charge of their lives. The individual has become self-authoring and a playfulness is celebrated in creating identities of constantly unfolding desires ‘that is never fully and finally realised’. Experiences do not have to mean anything – experience in itself becomes its own end (autotelic).

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT IN LATE MODERNITY

The cultural context in late modernity is characterised by a number of markers. Three of these markers are: the increasing importance of ‘locality’, consumption as a lifestyle, and incredulity towards various meta-narratives resulting in ‘fractured narratives’ (Hassan 2005).

The integration and globalisation of the markets produce ‘both homogeneity and heterogeneity’ (Usher et al. 1997, 3). Despite (or in the midst of) the homogeneity, there is an increasing specificity or locality – ‘a new sense of pride and value in the recognition of difference and the revival of hitherto suppressed identities. The globalisation of culture, then, far from repressing the local and the specific, actually stimulates it. What results is a paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, global marketisation devalues community and communitarian values whilst, on the other hand, globalisation’s effects of specificity and difference enhance these values, albeit in a reconfigured form’ (Usher et al. 1997, 4).

It would seem that the valuation of specificity and the valuation of homogeneity are not necessarily such comfortable neighbours as they are portrayed to be. Specificities are easily framed by meta-narratives as ‘disruptive’ and ‘fundamentalist’. This results in the classification of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘good
Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims’, specific descriptions and definitions of ‘democracy’, etcetera. On the other hand, local narratives can easily become new meta-narratives that demand allegiance.

The second cultural marker is the overriding culture and enchantment of consumption. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) speak of the ‘re-enchantment of consumption’. We can easily say that the dictum ‘I think therefore I am’ has changed to ‘I buy therefore I am’. The market creates new needs that are very seldom related to real needs. In this world where consumption enchants, the sign or symbol has become everything. This has further resulted in the celebration of various identities. *Homo sapiens* have become *homo economicus* (Mintzberg, Simons and Basu 2002; Mintzberg 2004). I work in order to become (or buy?) new multiple economic identities. Lifestyle has become everything – even for those on the fringes of society.

‘Lifestyle becomes as if not more, important than class position. Even those with little or no cultural capital are swept up in a culture of consumption, saturated with images and dreams of the desirable and where enterprises such as national lotteries seem to provide the only possibility for desired lifestyles’ (Usher et al. 1997, 5). We consume to find meaning in being human.

The third marker in the cultural context of late modernity is the general incredulity, risk and uncertainty that have become the signatures of life in the 21st century. Within this context the role of the state has changed. The state is no longer responsible for providing infrastructures and job security – it is no longer the welfare state of 20 years ago. The state has redrawn the traditional boundaries of responsibility. The individual increasingly carries and faces the responsibility of making choices without clear points of reference.

Where man (sic) was the reference point for modernity (more particularly ‘white’ man), humankind in all its diversity are coming to grips with the insecurity brought about by the ‘death’ of the grand narratives. The realisation that truths held dear are not necessarily true but are ‘formed, historically located cultural constructs’ (Usher et al. 1997, 7) has resulted in a dissolving of the self-certainty that man (sic) celebrated and proclaimed in modernity.

While the general incredulity of postmodernism has been well-documented, it does not seem to account for the rise of popular beliefs, fundamentalist faiths and religions. Despite the celebration of universal rights and the arrival of the Information Age, postmodernist incredulity at times celebrates pre-modern beliefs and assumptions. Is this postmodernist incredulity a new personalised Middle Ages where witches and sorcerers compete on the next channel with scientists and theologians?

**POSTMODERN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

‘Knowledge is not only constantly changing but is becoming more rapidly, almost overwhelmingly, available, mirroring a world of rapid change and bewildering
instability’ (Usher et al. 1997, 9). This overflow of information is, however, not as universal as many would like to believe. Millions of people are still excluded from the Information Age. To millions of people on this planet, knowing more will not necessarily change their lives. Unfortunately.

The abundance of information has also not resulted in a new definition of ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’. Bauman calls the abundance of information – ‘cheap information’ (1998). While information abounds, the boundaries between ‘official’ canons of knowledge (that are verified and sanctified) and other sources of information (however dubious the address) become less clear (and less important?). ‘... the decentring of knowledge has resulted in a valuing of different sources and forms of knowledge and a corresponding devaluing of specialist discipline-based knowledge’ (Usher et al. 1997, 9).

Local narratives, smaller narratives and stories have become important. Knowledge has ‘different purposes’ (Lyotard 1984). Knowledge is no longer a homogenous legitimisation of the grand narratives but has become a complex and often contradictory field of enquiry. While traditional grand narratives are being treated with suspicion, new grand narratives are developed and sometimes unquestionably accepted. Against the backdrop of the questioning of the previous ‘regimes of truth’, and the celebration of local and indigenous knowledge and perspectives, the question ‘What is knowledge?’ still lies in the eye of the beholder. Doris Lessing (1992, 212) recounts an experience in Zimbabwe to illustrate this point:

I was in an office in Harare. An American aid worker was arguing that the education being given to the children was inappropriate. What was the point of teaching them the British syllabus, with books suitable for Europe? What was needed was a good basic technical education. A black woman who was waiting her turn turned furiously on her. She said: ‘I see you whites are still just the same. You don’t want our children to have a real education. Oh no, that’s for your children. We want a good education for our children, just the same as yours.’

So, although the postmodern celebrates the local and the indigenous, O-levels in a British examination are not only the epitome of education for many children (especially in the developing world) but also for their employers and future universities and for global capital. Without O-levels, these children will just not have the cultural and mobility capital to participate in the global economy.

One of the developing new grand narratives is the narrative of ‘performativity’ within the broader context of educational processes that respond to the market as a relationship between producer and consumer: ‘Knowledge is exchanged on the basis of the performative value it has for the consumer’ (Usher et al. 1997, 14). The emphasis is on utility that displaces vocation and on technique that drives out calling.

In the above context, learning has become individuated and self-referential. I do
not learn to serve a greater purpose but to increase my capacities and marketability. ‘Every aspect of life, like every commodity, is imbued with self-referential meaning; every choice is an emblem of identity, a mark of difference, each one a message to ourselves and others of the sort of person we are’ (Usher et al. 1997, 18). ‘Lifestyle practices, given the emphasis on novelty, fashion, taste and style, are practices of consumption and moreover of a consumption which is potentially unending, since as desire can never be satisfied, there is always the need for new experiences and new learning’ (Usher et al. 1997, 18).

Various ‘confessional practices’ are in vogue (Usher et al. 1997, 19). Learners are encouraged to self-reflect and to master themselves (Senge 1994) – to release their inner powers. In confessional practices, it is the self that is ‘consumed’ in a process based on the never-ending fascination with the self, its deepest secrets and its hidden potential. Difference is signified in terms of an open, well-adjusted, fulfilled and empowered person who is ‘in touch’ with the self (as opposed to those who are out of touch, repressed and incapacitated). The obsession with the self is part of the wider marketisation of knowledge where individuals re-invent themselves by buying ‘knowledge’ in neat, pre-packaged units.

The marketisation of knowledge signifies education in service of the market. But is this new? The first apprenticeships were (most probably) not just for the fun of learning to be a carpenter or a craftsperson, but also to earn a living. So what is different? Where employment at first was functional in sustaining a living, employment is now imperative to sustaining consumption and satisfying the never-ending desires and need-to-haves of the unfolding self. Even the more critical voices in education are ‘rooted in shared interest, dismay or disquiet about the present; a reaction against current events rather than a common support for some particular end’ (Usher et al. 1997, 21).

POSTMODERN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS

Universities are no longer the only providers and guardians of knowledge: ‘when knowledge takes the form of information, it circulates through networks that evade the control of educational institutions (Plan, as quoted in Usher et al. 1997, 14). The 21st century saw the rise of the corporate university or transnational corporation having its own skills development programmes and training. The increase in the number of programmes and students enrolling at these corporate universities has raised concerns that students would rather enrol for qualifications offered (and most probably sponsored) by their corporations; that the knowledge ‘products’ will become ‘marketable’ products that can be copyrighted and sold; and that government sponsorship of new research projects will be biased towards practitioners rather than academics (Barnett 2000, 413).

The epistemologies or the knowledge that have been valued and prized by universities are being challenged as new forms of knowledge and epistemologies
emerge. Performative knowledge is a case in point: ‘... as the university becomes inserted into society, its epistemologies change: knowledge becomes performative in character and loses its power to enlighten’ (Barnett 2000, 411).

The quality assurance of knowledge claims have therefore adapted to consumer demands for faster ‘accreditation’ of knowledge. The market emphasis on ‘transportable skills’ and ‘reusable knowledge objects’ challenge the knowledge base of universities. The university has reacted to the knowledge economy by producing its own ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

**POSTMODERN LEARNING**

In the above context, learning has become a de-institutionalised and extremely personal endeavour; a formal and informal enterprise of engaging with the enlargement of the possible. Education has become a negotiated narrative between the marketplace, ‘regimes of truth’ and sense-making relationships.

The uncertainty and risk which permeates postmodern culture require education to assist students to cultivate a high tolerance for difficulty, uncertainty and error. . . : ‘uncertainty is not a passing state of puzzlement but an acceptance of the provisional and contingent in what we believe and do, whilst error is not simply falsehood that will be replaced by truth but more an unacceptable version of an idea or value that is entangled with other ideas and values we are not prepared to abandon’ (Usher et al. 1997, 25). We should therefore embrace the partiality of what we now know and value.

A further characteristic of postmodern education is the fact that learners make choices that are based on desire (including the desire to be optimally positioned in the market) rather than a search for enlightenment and the mastery of a canon of knowledge. This can no longer be automatically considered ‘perverse and uneducational’ (Usher et al. 1997, 26). The focus for adult educators has shifted from defending canons and institutional training to being ‘practitioners working “professionally” with adults, whoever and wherever they may be, and within a variety of learning institutions, both inside and outside formal educational institutions’ (Usher et al. 1997, 26–27).

It would seem as if the concepts of ‘knowing’, the ‘process of coming to know’ and the question ‘What is considered worthwhile to know?’ have changed dramatically. It would seem as if the learner or the ‘one who wants to know’ and his or her context are *inseparable* and merged into one emergent growing entity or concept (Fenwick 2000; Davis and Sumara 1997). This means that the ‘one who wants to know’ is phrasing this question in a particular context. In a different context, the ‘one who wants to know’ will want to know different things. This context is furthermore a community of ‘texts and relationships’ (Fenwick 2000, 5), dynamic and changing constantly.

Therefore, ‘coming to know’ is the result of participative networks of action in which the identity of the learner and the environment co-emerge ‘in enactments of
cognition’ (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991, 44). Davis and Sumara (1997, 110) explain that knowing ‘exists in the interstices of a complex ecology or organismic relationality’.

Therefore the dictum ‘I know therefore I am’ can be adapted to state: ‘I know in relation to ...’. ‘Knowing’ unfolds in the interplay between context, the ‘knower’ and other ‘knowings’. ‘Knowing cannot be understood except in terms of co-emergence: each participant’s understandings are entwined with the other’s, and individual knowing co-emerges with collective knowing’ (Fenwick 2000, 7).

In a postmodern and (what Fenwick calls) a ‘post-corporate’ culture, individuals engage in continual problem solving – ‘in fact, invention is a way of being’. Employees as learners describe their work knowing process as ‘knowing on the fly’ (Fenwick 2000, 10). These entrepreneurial ‘knowers’ rely on three things, the first being their ability to intuitively read the systems around them and how their actions will influence the surrounding systems. These entrepreneurial ‘knowers’ further listen to their own inner values and intuition. Thirdly, they integrate new knowledge, information and ideas into practice – an ongoing process of inventive experimentation (Fenwick 2000, 10).

It would seem that these entrepreneurial learners have learned to live and work amidst uncertainty and certainty. ‘Learning to act amidst uncertainty and complexity without a sense of mastery, while trying to frame and construct meaning of a completely unfamiliar situation, became for many a way of working’ (Fenwick 2000, 10). The residue of this continuous learning and invention of solutions to new problems and paradoxes is called ‘self-knowing’ (Fenwick 2000, 11).

This self-knowing is in stark contrast to ‘self-mastery’. It is not the prerequisite for acting but the residue of ‘self-in-action, self-determined, creative, inspiring [identity] ... woven into networks of belonging and action’ (Fenwick 2000, 11). Sumara and Davis (1997, 303) describe this process as ‘a continuous enlargement of the space of the possible’.

The challenge for all institutions of learning seems to be to create spaces where learners-within-contexts-and-relationships can develop ‘knowing-on-the-fly’.

THE NEW ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES

From the preceding sections it is quite clear that universities face a different dispensation than 20 or more years ago. The primary domain of the university in the sense of canonising ‘universal’ knowledge is severely contested. The very epistemology of what is considered worthwhile knowing, and who is responsible for its production and validation, have become part of more and more role players.

In the light of the above Barnett formulates four ‘new’ roles of the university of the 21st century. The first role is to give revolutionary accounts of the world – to produce new images, new technologies, new texts, new discourses and new forms of professional life. ‘Turning the university’s knowledge production system from
an endorsing machine to one that seeks to produce radically new frames of understanding would require considerable changes in the ways in which research is funded, evaluated and managed’ (Barnett 2000, 417). Here knowledge will not involve acquiring what is already out there but will be responding to a question, bringing something into existence that did not exist before (Biesta 2004, 320).

The second role Barnett suggests is that of critical commentating. Universities should invoke a forum for critical thought which ‘scrutinises the new knowledges and evaluate them as such’ (Barnett 2000, 418). This requires a thirds role, namely a therapeutic epistemology – ‘In an age of supercomplexity, in an age of radical uncertainty, the key educational challenge is not one of knowledge as such. It is that of being ...’ (Barnett 2000, 418). Being is a key epistemological concept for the university. Universities should no longer look at the rules of description, but should rather explore and interrogate the roles of assimilation.

The last role Barnett suggests is a pedagogy for critical action – ‘enabling individuals to act purposively in an environment where all the bets are off, where everything is uncertain and where everything is challengeable’ (Barnett 2000, 419). The performativity of knowledge has to be converted into critical action.

**BEING EDUCATED IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY – SOME POINTERS**

If having ‘papers’ do not necessarily mean that a person is to be regarded as ‘being educated’, what would the indicators of ‘being educated’, be? The article suggests three pointers or markers of what seems to be indispensable markers. These pointers refer to our being-in-the world, our being-with-others and our ‘becoming’.

The first pointer is the need for an acute understanding of our planetary citizenship and the need to develop interdependent, sustainable participatory networks of being. Our temporary, planetary citizenship depends on sustainable relationships with all life on earth. Without the earth sustaining life and vice versa, life on this planet will become extinct. In stark contrast to the rampant individualism in markets and education, we should re-evaluate the future of homo economicus. There is more to life than increasing wealth. There is more to life than ‘having more’. We should therefore rediscover being homo sapiens; living on a planet with finite resources. All curricula should celebrate individuation instead of individualism. Learners should ‘be called to awake’, becoming continuously open to learn about themselves and about the communities in which they are integrated. Should learners develop a genuine sense of who they are as individuals, they may be able to enter into more authentic relationships with others. All curricula should facilitate the gradual and continuing unfolding of individuals’ authentic lives within different communities. Learners should rediscover themselves as learners-in-communities. Instead of the autonomous and self-directed learner, we should nourish interdependency, learners-amongst-peers. We should rediscover the implications of being human together on this planet.
The above implies that the way we teach should steer away from a celebration of individualism to learning as relational, interdependent, emerging and context-bound.

The second pointer towards ‘being educated’ is the need for critical literacies. If we (as the human race) want to continue to survive within our context of finite resources, we will have to redefine what it means to be human on earth within the next 100 years. What competencies (values, knowledge and skills) will ensure human survival? Which literacies will be essential?

There are serious concerns that the present educational project delivers computer and information literate students who do not have the skills or the values to deal with ambiguity, diversity and paradox. All curricula should encourage learners to explore different viewpoints, to develop a critical hermeneutics of caring. Within such a heuristic curriculum as temporary space, critical thinking and reflexivity are paramount. Learners should develop a critical consciousness in which they interrogate economic, cultural and political commonplaces. They should be encouraged to investigate and redefine clichéd explanations for poverty, racism and sexism, and to be bold to explore different responses to the paradoxes of creating societal wealth while addressing vast inequalities and finite resources.

The third pointer suggests the need for whole-person education. Western education practices have until recently emphasised cognitive development as the only or most important aspect of education. Education was seen as a transfer of knowledge from the all-knowing educator to the ignorant learners. Research in andragogy and neurobiology have opened up teaching and learning to involve much more than just the cognitive acquisition of knowledge. There are different ways of knowing – experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. In all of these the human learns not only with his or her rational abilities but also by responding with all his or her senses and abilities (affective and cognitive; conscious and unconscious) to the learning experience.

Whole person learning is an essential part of lifelong and life-wide learning. In such an approach the fragmentation between theory and practice is broken Theory and practice meet in praxis – where the learner and the teacher are engaged in a reflective, continuing process of re-attribute, redefining, constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing competencies.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be educated in the 21st century? This article has not provided answers to the question, but explored the context in which this question is relevant. It is crucial that universities define anew what it means to be human in an era characterised by uncertainty, risk and incredulity. It is, however, also an era of unbounded opportunities and challenges. Never before have we known so much about ourselves, our planet and our universe. Never before has humanity had such capacity to generate not only more information, but new knowledge.
Being educated means much more than being a consumer in a specific locality in a global village. Being educated should entail a critical and reflective understanding of our planetary citizenship. Universities have the obligation to serve humanity in a journey towards a more just and sustainable society.

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