Title: “Do you want fries with that?” The McDonaldization of University education – some critical reflections upon neo-liberal managerialism and the teaching and learning agenda in nursing higher education.

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Summary

Neo-liberal managerial practices are ubiquitous within contemporary universities worldwide. This paper will explore elements of the architecture of such practices within teaching and learning in nursing curricula in Australia, with a particular focus upon technology. The nurse academic workforce is currently undergoing a generational change and it is timely to critically analyze the current narratives dominating the teaching and learning agenda.

Keywords: technology; neo-liberalism; McDonaldization; nursing; higher education.
Technology, Society and Education

When Marx and Engels offered competing visions of the effect of new technology on society, the former depicting it as a tool that would be used by those in power for exacting yet more labour out of the workforce, and the latter as liberating the workers from the drudgery of the factory production line and back-breaking physical labour, neither could have envisaged what “technology” would actually become or the profound effect it would have not only on social life but on our very identity as persons. Despite the chasm between their 19th century concept of technology and the 21st century reality, their concerns as to its effects are as relevant as ever. Throughout history, simple technologies – the slate, the chalkboard, pen and paper, the overhead projector, the computer, and all the other paraphernalia of the classroom - have been used by educators, under their control, and largely at their discretion. A profound revolution has taken place in the last two decades, whereby technology is no longer an aid but a powerful shaper of education as a national project, to the extent that it now largely determines the educational process at the institutional and ‘classroom’ level.

Our experience as academics within higher education is that rather than liberating creativity, promoting innovation and increasing autonomy, the ways in which new educational technologies are utilised produces uniformity, and increases compliance by restricting and prescribing what may be done. Furthermore, managerialism, with its tendency toward micro-management, increases the ease of monitoring the degree of that compliance. In this way technology and managerialism work synergistically as a machinery of control and surveillance of both staff and students (Connell, 2013; Orr & Orr, 2016). Examples of this are readily seen in the higher education sector within Australia, and include the increasing intrusiveness and regulation of teaching and learning processes, greater requirement for standardization of course materials within a ‘blended learning’ agenda, centralization of core administrative tasks, and the use of questionable metrics to quantify the quality of teaching. Within such environments, it is hardly surprising that from among 18 leading academic nations, only British academics had lower work satisfaction scores than Australians (Fredman & Doughney 2012).

We argue that because of its focus on vocationally oriented courses and standardized academic processes, neoliberalism in the context of higher education restricts academic exploration and operates to stifle scholarship, and it is not an exaggeration to characterize it as anti-academic. Indeed, Giroux (2014) refers to neoliberalism waging a war against higher education. In America, where neoliberal ideology is most deeply embedded, higher education has been repeatedly described as being ‘in crisis’. Blumenstyk (2015), for example, writes: “Many inside those institutions—as well as many without—now worry that the higher-minded aspects of higher education—to nurture students’ social, cultural, and intellectual growth and help them to develop into not just twenty-first century workers but also citizens of a twenty-first century world—are being diminished if not altogether lost” (p.4). Similar statements appear in publications from around the world, and elements of the neoliberal influence on education and its associated discourses have been widely discussed by educationalists and intellectuals (Freire 1997, Aronowitz 2000, Hill 2003, Giroux 2014, FitzSimmons 2015, Saunders 2015). Giroux, echoing Agamben, argues that without a genuine critical pedagogy what is left is a ‘bare’ version of pedagogy. By this, Giroux means a version that places emphasis on “ruthless competitivism, hedonism, [and] the cult of
individualism”, and within which “compassion is a weakness, and moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations” (Giroux 2010, p.185).

**Techno-managerialism in Teaching, Learning & Assessment**

As a consequence of a neoliberal political environment over the past decade, the Australian higher education sector has undergone dramatic change in the core activity areas of teaching, learning and research (Olssen & Peters, 2005). These changes have been driven by factors such as deregulation of the sector and resultant increased competition, an intensified focus upon quality assurance, introduction of corporatisation and performance-based funding models, changes to the metrics by which research quality and outputs are measured, and a steady decline in Government funding (Darbyshire, 2007; Lipton, 2015). The so-called ‘new managerialism’ which underpins increasingly corporatized institutions such as universities reflects a neoliberal rationality that focusses upon the adoption by public institutions of ‘technologies, management practices and values more commonly found in the private business sector’ (White et al 2011, p. 180).

Concurrent to these changes occurring within the higher education sector, the delivery of nursing courses within the Australian higher education sector, like other professional degrees, is also experiencing significant internal and external discipline oriented challenges. Schools of Nursing across Australia are under pressure to produce increasing numbers of graduates, not only due to economic forces within Universities but also because of the rapidly approaching workforce shortage as the baby boomers leave the workforce, and more nurses are required to meet the growing demands of an ageing population globally. Further discipline-based challenges include the growing internationalization of the workforce; the ageing of the existing workforce and the population generally; the need for scalable, affordable models of clinical supervision of undergraduates when on placement; and, increasing pressure to graduate ‘work-ready’ Registered Nurses within 3 years, when all other equivalent undergraduate health professional degrees are 4-6 years in duration.

Addressing these challenges within a higher education system subject to a complex regulatory ‘architecture’ whilst endeavouring to meet the challenges of teaching, scholarship and research, has highlighted significant support needs for both existing and future nurse academics (McDermid et al, 2012).

Among the contemporary teaching and learning structures and processes being transformed by techno-managerialism, a virtual smorgasbord of so-called ‘technology-enhanced learning’ (TEL) (Bayne, 2015) environments including synchronous and asynchronous web-based discussion forums, blended learning frameworks, virtual classrooms, lectorials, podcasts and simulated learning experiences (loosely labelled in some quarters as ‘edutainment’) are now common elements within higher education courses. In addition, freely accessible web-based Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are having an increasingly pervasive influence, which Skiba (2012) has referred to as ‘MOOC Mania’. Krause and Lowe’s (2014) *Invasion of the MOOCs* highlights some of the promises and perils associated with MOOCs. According to Ritzer (2013), MOOCs are inevitably a site of extreme McDonaldization, which is discussed below. The teaching technologies described above are promoted as enhancing the student experience, and criticism of their use could run the risk of being seen by one’s academic colleagues as out of touch with contemporary teaching and learning practices. Adding further pressure to integrate such technologies and reflecting a form of neo-
Taylorism, educational/instructional designers are employed as experts within universities to assist faculty with the design and delivery of learning experiences (Terlouw, 2014).

The McDonaldization of higher education

An increasingly common lens through which neoliberal ideology, and its attendant techno-managerialism, is being viewed is that of sociologist George Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis (1993). Drawing upon the Weberian theory of instrumental rationalization, Ritzer (2000) describes the five dimensions of McDonaldization as efficiency, calculability, predictability, control and the ‘irrationality of rationality’, or what Weber metaphorically described as an ‘iron cage’ (Quinn, 2015). Its application to higher education has been discussed by many authors over the past three decades including, for example, Hartley (1995), by Ritzer himself (1996, 2002), and subsequently critiqued by authors such as Hayes and Wynyard (2002), Garland (2008), Lorenz (2012) and Nadolny and Ryan (2015).

Ralph (2013, p.233) citing Ritzer (1996) highlights ways in which the McDonaldization of organizational systems such as Universities exerts control over employees through the ‘graduated introduction of non-human technology’ in order to control both product and process, and remove uncertainty. These technologies and practices potentially offer much to both staff and students in terms of virtual engagement and innovation, but increasing technicization presents some profound challenges. Firstly, it demands continual expansion of technological literacy and access to its associated resources, such as compatible computers with high bandwidth internet connection and a working knowledge of how to navigate the nascent array of on-line platforms and programs. Secondly, a lack of enthusiasm for these approaches, but also inability to keep pace, can be used as leverage to reduce the number of tenured staff in favour of an increasingly casualized workforce. Thirdly, as Hayes and Wynyard (2002) suggests, ‘applying the same methods of production to the mass delivery of the higher-education curriculum can mean a simplification (dumbing down) of content in order to reach the largest number of clients’ (p.187). Lastly, it requires significant conscious effort and institutional facilitation to retain the human face of higher education and to protect those aspects of curriculum not adequately susceptible to such methods.

Techno-Managerialism and Education/University Life

Techno-managerialism promotes a retrogressive form of education that has long been severely criticized. It has a range of important implications regarding how it shapes the way in which knowledge is conceived. Wholesale adoption of the business model presents knowledge as a commodity, to be bought and sold, and accessible only to those who can afford to purchase it, with all the class-related implications that entails. Technology-based education problematizes the relationship between knowledge and understanding, and invokes not only Gilbert Ryle’s famous distinction between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’, but also the ‘knowing why’ requirement of the reflective professional – a requirement placed upon all registered nurses as described within the new standards for practice (NMBA 2016).

The new approaches also alter how education is conceived, both in the broad sense and in relation to specific disciplines. Following on from the argument above, it provides students with a narrow technical-instrumental training rather than an education. There is no development of the person, of their individual interests, skills, and preferences; little opportunity to explore their emotional life, values or ethical beliefs, their prejudices and
fears; no chance to reflect upon and improve their social skills, and no room for self-expression or creativity. And, there is little opportunity to participate face-to-face in an academic community. Techno-managerialism makes some pretence at encouraging the creativity and critical thinking of staff and students, but that is only within precisely predefined parameters tied to the specific assessment criteria and learning outcomes. It cannot foster a genuine spirit of enquiry, true critical thinking or reflective practice.

Such a stultifying view of higher education revises beliefs about the role/functions of the university. Its business model casts the university as a profit-making enterprise, in which its financial health becomes its paramount concern. In an effort to balance its accounts whilst maintaining the quality of its graduates, generating acceptable performance indicators for Government, and retaining its position in international league tables, income generation becomes a major focus at all levels. Staffing levels are inevitably reduced in favour of technology-based mass education, and the burden on remaining staff is maximized. The new learning is preferred by the business model because it is concerned with quantity rather than quality, and maximum measureable output for the least resource input is the order of the day. Technical-vocational training becomes the dominant feature of the university, with humanities and non-science based disciplines marginalized. Techno-managerialism is then promoted as the ‘best fit’ for such an institution, when in fact it is a natural consequence of the Federal government’s sink-or-swim ideology of self-funding and the minimal state. The anomaly of promoting the new methods as valuing self-direction/responsibility, is not only at odds with the reality of standardization and strict regulation, but it also cannot be reconciled to the business model which sees students as relatively passive customers, occasionally referred to as EIUs – economic income units. To suggest that universities provide a true education is a falsehood for all but the elite universities of the world.

Concluding comments: Getting the best out of Techno-Managerialism

Half a century ago, the French socialist thinker Andre Gorz (1965), deploring the technicization of university education he was witnessing, was nonetheless able to conjure an optimistic view of its future, based on what he thought was a set of fundamental anomalies in the process. Firstly, the success of any society, including its industries and businesses, ultimately calls upon sets of skills that surpass those installed by a purely technical-instrumental curriculum and the way of thinking that it generates. There is a level at which the need for critical and creative thinkers is acknowledged even in the health care sector, and there have been – from time to time – calls for universities to foster these talents in nurses, rather than simply teach clinical procedures and factual knowledge. Secondly, and more saliently, students in universities inevitably become aware of unexplored bodies of learning and alternative ways of thinking, and the fact that these are being by-passed by a narrow industry-focused, technology-driven curriculum will evoke dissatisfaction and resistance. Indeed, a few foolhardy students may even attempt to draw on these in their work, thereby incurring penalties for stepping outside the narrow confines of their strictly regulated, pre-set learning objectives and assessment targets. Gorz argued that students would resent being denied a wider education and forced down strictly defined pathways, and that they would find more-or-less subtle ways of resisting and undermining those pathways.

The cover of the Pink Floyd album “Animals”, in which a pink pig is pictured floating between two chimneys of the Battersea Power Station comes to mind here. We think that it is
just as likely that Australian university students will become free thinkers and activists, prepared to sacrifice their university careers in order to bring about a much-needed grassroots revolution in higher education. And what about the academics? Are they any more likely to sacrifice their careers to that end? We think not, and again those who can are likely to exit the system or move from one university to another in search of a fulfilling academic life.

If we, as a profession, are genuinely committed to the well-being of patients, we must ensure that the education of nurses goes beyond the narrow confines of a standardized, prescriptive training, and accommodates opportunities to encourage creativity, insightfulness, and critical thinking. We must encourage nurses to step back from the received view, to recognize that it is a received view, and to utilize a range of insights, including those from the so-called soft sciences and humanities, to cast a critical eye upon it, with a view to detecting its weaknesses and considering what benefits might flow from other perspectives.

This would require a radical re-think about the structure of the nursing profession, and the way nurses are prepared for their roles within increasingly technical and commodified health systems (Austin, 2007). We need to urgently explore how an increasingly technical education can be moderated by experiential and humanities-based dimensions. We need to revisit those dimensions and work out how they can become an influential component of the contemporary curriculum, sitting alongside the technical-knowledge based dimensions that have forced them out. We know it can be done, if there is the will. If it is not, and nursing continues to drift along without regard for the humanity of nurses and patients, we can look forward to rapid turnover rates in hospitals, high drop-out and failure rates in the universities, falling standards and the likelihood of Mid-Staffordshire style failures in Australia.
References


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