

Student as Producer: A Pedagogy for the Avant-Garde; or, how do revolutionary teachers teach?

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It is worth taking the trouble to describe the contemporary significance of students and the university...as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history (Benjamin, 1996)

'As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production' (Marx & Engels, 1973).

'The Universe has lost its centre overnight, and woken up to find it has countless centres. So that each one can now be seen as the centre, or none at all. Suddenly there is a lot of room' (Brecht, B. 2006 Life of Galileo 8 [1945]).

Abstract

In this paper I set out the intellectual ideas that lie behind the concept of Student as Producer, and how that idea is being developed across the sector and at the University of Lincoln. The theoretical basis for my work is derived from critical social theory grounded in avant-garde Marxism that developed in Soviet Russia after the Bolshevik uprising in 1917, before being suppressed by Stalin, and a group of modernist Marxists working in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. A key issue for Student as Producer is that social learning is more than the individual learning in a social context, and includes the way in which the social context itself is transformed through progressive pedagogic practice. This transformation includes the institution within which the pedagogical activities are taking place, and the society out of which the particular institution is derived. At a time when the market-based model for social development appears increasingly untenable, the creation of a more progressive and sustainable social world becomes ever more necessary and desirable. Work on developing the principles and practice of Student as Producer are currently funded through the National Teaching Fellowship Project Scheme 2010 – 2013.

What is Student as Producer?

Student as Consumer

Student as Producer is a critical response to attempts by recent governments in the UK, and around the world, to create a consumerist culture among undergraduate students. The context for the new student as consumer is a system of higher education dominated by marketised and commercial imperatives (Higher Ambitions 2010, Willetts, 2010), involving the intensification of academic work as a key economic priority (De Anglis and Harvie, 2009). The attempt to consolidate consumerism in British universities forms part of a much broader attempt by

governments to reinstate the ideology of market-led social development following the near collapse of the world financial system in 2008 - 2009 (Amin, 2009; Bellamy Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Gamble, 2009).

Student as Producer is a concept that emerged out of the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research. The Centre was established as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in 2005 by the Sociology department at University of Warwick and the School for the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes. The Reinvention Centre promoted undergraduate research as a pedagogic device, challenging academics to design research-like and research engaged teaching and learning into their curriculum, at all levels. The approach was inspired by intellectual ideas associated with the development of the university as a progressive institution, and reflected the tensions within and between those different intellectual frameworks. Central to the Reinvention Centre project was reinventing the role and purpose of higher education and not just the future of teaching and learning: reinventing the curriculum as the first stage of reinventing the university (Lambert et al., 2007).

These intellectual ideas were derived from the historical development of the modern university, with specific reference to Humboldt's University of Berlin, established in 1815 as the first modern European university. A central feature of Humboldt's university was linking research and teaching as the fundamental principle for a progressive liberal-humanist pedagogy. It was the subsequent disconnection of research and teaching, and the problems it was causing in research intensive universities in the US, which had motivated colleagues to find ways to reinvent teaching in higher education (Boyer, 1990; Boyer Commission, 1998). Central to the work of reinventing the undergraduate curriculum was the work of Ernest Boyer, who highlighted the imbalance between research and teaching in research intensive universities in the US. Boyer argued for a reconfiguration of teaching and research with teaching recognised as an important and fundamental part of academic life.

While the Reinvention Centre was closely connected to Humboldt's liberal humanism and Boyer's reforming agenda, the Centre at Warwick was deeply embedded in a more revolutionary social science derived from critical pedagogy. This more radical approach included an engagement with the work of Friere (1970), as well as other well known contemporary proponents of critical pedagogy and popular education (Mclaren, 2000, Allman, 2001, Rikowski, 2006, Amsler and Canaan 2008). This more radical theoretical approach was consolidated by relating pedagogic practice to critical social theory, particularly the subversive European Marxism of the early 20th century. These included the work that modernist Marxists were producing in the period between the 1920s and the 1930s, and the movement of avant-garde painters, sculptors, psychologists, educationalists, scientists and activists that emerged in Russia in the post revolutionary period in 1917. Colleagues working in the Centre at Warwick were interested in the model for higher education that this theoretical work inspired, and particularly the radical alternative vision for universities dramatically made real by the events of May 1968 in Paris, France and around the world.

These avant-garde Marxisms provide an antidote to the dogmatic assumptions of traditional Marxism, as well as the psychologism and the positivism of empirical social science, both of which dominate current research into higher education. What

distinguishes these avant - garde Marxisms from traditional Marxism and liberal social theory is their very different interpretations of the future. Liberal theory posits a sustainable future on an optimistic belief in economic growth, notwithstanding periodic downturns in the economic cycle. Traditional Marxism has a positive belief in the inevitability of socialism derived out of the structural contradictions in capitalist society. Avant – garde Marxism, on the other hand, is driven by a lack of faith in the inevitability of progressive transformation, based on a negative rather than a positive critique of the social relations of capitalist society (Holloway et al 2008). For these subversive Marxisms the future is not the result of naturally upturning economic cycles, nor the structural contradictions of capitalism, but is made by the possibility and necessity of progressive social transformation through practical action, i.e., class struggle. For this version of Marxism the logic of revolution is not based on the call to some lofty liberal principle, e.g. social justice, or the empowerment of the powerless, but the more practical imperatives driven by the avoidance of disaster beyond human imagination (Lowy, 2005).

Student as Producer was the title of the first conference run by the Reinvention Centre in the summer of 2007. Following the conference, Student as Producer became the subject for a number of keynote presentations made at that time, and since. During that period Student as Producer became more than a title for presentations, and started to exist as a slogan for a particular way of teaching, i.e., a pedagogy for the avant-garde.

Who is Student as Producer?

Two writers - Walter Benjamin and Lev Vygotsky, the former linked to the movement of avant - garde Marxism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and the latter to post revolutionary Soviet Russia - stand out as having a significant impact on the concept and practice of Student as Producer.

Together Benjamin and Vygotsky establish the key principles for a pedagogy for the avant - garde: that students are the subjects of the intellectual process of teaching and learning, and that a progressive pedagogy involves reinventing the politics of production from within, against and beyond the current social relations of capitalist production. The issue for them is not simply how do students learn, but how do radical intellectuals teach?

Walter Benjamin: Author as Producer

Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) was a German-Jewish social theorist, critic and philosopher, occupying ‘... a unique place in the intellectual and political panorama of the twentieth century’ (Lowy 2005). His writings were a combination of modernism, the Messianic and Marxism, making him ‘probably the most peculiar Marxist ever produced by this movement’ (Arendt 1999). In his career he wrote on a wide number of topics, including art, literature, philosophy and history; and has been described as ‘a resource and research tool for overpowering present political and cultural conformism’ (Leslie, 2000).

The concept Student as Producer was based on the title of a lecture, *Author as Producer*, given by Benjamin to the Society of Anti-Fascists in Paris in

April 1934. The key question for the lecture was what how do radical intellectuals intervene in moments of social crisis, and what form should that intervention take. The lecture was inspired by the Russian constructivists, and their recognition of the role of intellectuals at the centre of the production of a new and experimental society. Benjamin took from the constructivists the central idea that production was not simply about the making of finished works, but that the process of production should contain its own revolutionary organising principle. For Benjamin it is not enough that a progressive intellectual declares their commitment to progressive social transformation, but that their work reflects the ways in which the social relations of capitalist society might be transformed. This transformation is expressed by the way in which progressive political practice is embedded within the nature of the work itself, and most particularly the way in which the product is produced.

Benjamin highlights Bertholdt Brecht's Epic Theatre to illustrate this effect. Epic Theatre seeks to create an active and critical attitude on the part of the audience so as to divest the performance of any illusion of pretence or artificiality (Wolin 1994), undermining the reproduction of illusion, through experimentation. Key to the process of experimentation was the practice of astonishment, rather than empathy, and key to the process of astonishment was the practice of interruption (Wolin 1994). For Brecht these interruptions were designed to confront and to challenge the audience, forcing them, to take sides. In a theatre performance interruption might be in the form of a song or a chorus, but in the written form the interruption is created through quotations, or *'thought fragments'*, interrupting the flow of presentation with *'transcendent force'*, while, at the same time, *'concentrating within themselves that which is presented'* (Arendt 1999).

Benjamin reminds us that Epic Theatre reveals that human action is not so much the product of individual need, but is the product of a material matrix of social relations within which human life is embedded. It is this material matrix that the emotionally driven, character – centred orientation of mainstream theatre avoids (Wolin, 1994). And so the play becomes pedagogical, with a 'teacher' attitude, bringing consumers of a product into contact with the production process, turning readers and spectators into collaborators (Benjamin, 1983).

Benjamin extending this thinking to the student experience and the issue of productivity. In the 'Life of Students', written in 1914 -1915, he considered the nature of student life in relation to the politics of production. For Benjamin student life is undermined by vocational learning which has perverted the creative spirit and *'taken possession of the universities as a whole and has isolated them from the non-official creative life of the mind'* (Benjamin, 1996). This perversion has been further exacerbated by moving away from Humboldt's vision for university teaching:

The organisation of the university has ceased to be grounded in the productivity of its students, as its founders had envisaged. They thought of students as teachers and learners at the same time; as teacher, because productivity implies complete autonomy, with their minds fixed on science instead of the instructor's personality' (Benjamin, 1996).

Benjamin is important because of the way in which he presents a revolutionary pedagogy on the basis of the reorganisation of intellectual labour. His work suggests that intellectual labour can be radicalised by including the student as the subject

rather than the object of the teaching and learning process, i.e., the student as producer not consumer. While he did extend his thoughts on teaching and learning in schools, anticipating Freire by maintaining that teachers had much to learn from their students (Benjamin, 1973), his pedagogical theory was not fully schematised. In order to develop his approach further it is necessary to explore more deeply into the work on which his own formulations were derived.

Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Teacher

The main inspirations for Benjamin's approach to pedagogy in the Author as Producer are the Russian constructivists and the group of avant-garde intellectuals who emerged in Russia post 1917. Among the most significant of these was the revolutionary scientist, Lev Vygotsky.

The problem Vygotsky sought to overcome was the tautological logic that lies at the core of psychology, where *'the explanation for states of consciousness are discovered by the concept of consciousness itself'* (Vygotsky, 1986). For Vygotsky, the science that underpinned the explanatory principle for the nature of human intellectuality was to be discovered at a more fundamental level of social reality. He found that more fundamental level in Karl Marx's theory of capitalist society.

Marx insists that all forms of social existence, e.g., identity, consciousness and class, are grounded in the social context out of which they are derived. For Marx the individual is the 'social individual', i.e., the form that individuality takes is not separate from the form of society, so that it makes no sense to talk about 'individuals' in abstraction from the social world.

For Vygotsky, as for Marx, labour is the fundamental organisational principle for the social and natural world, and is responsible for the consequences that flow from these arrangements, including the development of intellectual thought (Newman and Holzman, 1993). At that time, it was seen that the barrier to intellectual development lay in the way in which industrial production was organised within the capitalist factory. Vygotsky's was interested in how to restore the connection between intellectual and manual labour through the process of education, in ways that would further the development of human intellectuality.

Vygotsky argues that teaching begins from the student's experience in a particular social context. Pushing that notion to the extreme of its radical logic, he suggests that the social context must be arranged by the teacher so that the student teaches themselves: *'Education should be structured so that it is not the student that is educated, but that the student educates himself'* or, in other words, *'...the real secret of education lies in not teaching'* (Vygotsky, 1997).

Vygotsky is arguing against an instructional paradigm in favour of a learning and development approach. By learning and development Vygotsky does not mean learning in order to learn, but learning so that the student may develop intellectually, and emotionally and become more socially aware (Newman and Holzman, 1993) The learning and development approach insists that for students to acquire knowledge, the intellectual function of learning must be associated with practical tasks. For Vygotsky, the ways in which the students are taught by listening to lectures mirrors the alienating labour process of the capitalist factory. Lecturing, for

Vygotsky, is not teaching *'in setting forth ready-prepared bits and pieces of knowledge...he has ceased being a teacher'* (Vygotsky, 1997).

Vygotsky demands that the teacher, should arrange the social context of learning as its own process of production: in such a way that learning *'may be achieved only in the very process of labour and in the very process of attaining this knowledge'* (Vygotsky, 1997). The student is not simply consuming the final product of someone else's labour, but is involved with the entire process of production of knowing: *'The more the students strivings and interests are bound up with this ultimate point of his labour efforts, the more powerful and the more effective will be the co-ordinating and connective effect of those efforts within the overall system of his reactions'* (Vygotsky 1997). Knowledge and meaning are created, and the student is remade, by reconnecting intellectual and manual labour.

For Vygotsky, in the factory of the future the labour process takes on a pedagogic function and the student merges with the worker to become: the student-worker; the pedagogic function does not teach the student-worker various skills, but rather enables the student-worker to understand the overall scheme of the production process, within which they will find their own place and meaning, as a process of learning and development. By situating themselves within a pedagogical process, whose meaning and purpose they understand, the production of knowledge is revealed not as something that is already discovered and static (i.e., dogmatism), but is uncovered as *'the dynamic context of its own appearance'* (Vygotsky, 1997).

This is much more than a straight forward teaching and learning agenda, but is concerned with the ethical and political transformation of the social world (Newman and Holzman, 1993). What is key to Vygotsky's notion of social learning is that it is not only the individual student who will be transformed, but that the nature and character of the social will be remade. For Vygotsky it is meaningless to have abstract ideals for the student, e. g., *'the indivisible and harmonious personality'* or the *'educated and civilised person'*, as this says nothing about the politics and ethics of the social system out of which the education process is derived (Vygotsky 1997).

Vygotsky argues that a progressive educational system must be based on a progressive social context, and any attempt to construct educational ideas in a society within which its social contradictions are not resolved is a *'utopian dream'* (Vygotsky, 1997). The point is that pedagogy can not be *'politically indifferent'* and that education follows a basic pattern depending on its dominant social class (Vygotsky, 1997).

The question remains how can the social context be transformed by the process of education. For Vygotsky, the social is transformed by the student going beyond what they felt they were capable of achieving: *'education is not about adaption to an already existing environment, but the creation of an adult who will look beyond his own environment'* (Vygotsky,1997). In order for this to happen the learning process must be arranged so that the student is able to achieve more than is possible based on their current level of education. This is done by working with teachers and other students as collaborators in the process of education. Vygotsky advocates a form of non-alienated learning, placing the student in the role of *'investigator who is out to establish a particular truth and whom the teacher only guides'* (Vygotsky, 1997). By

defining the student as investigator, at the centre of their own learning and development, Vygotsky is reconnecting intellectual and manual labour, undermining the capitalist labour process

In later work, Vygotsky refers to this getting beyond the limits of what the student might be expected to achieve as '*zo-ped*', or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1986). ZPD has become an ubiquitous concept within learning development, even if it is interpreted in ways that run counter to Vygotsky's original formulations. In the most radical interpretations of Vygotsky's work, the ZPD '*is not a place at all; it is an activity, an historical unity, the essential socialness of human beings expressed as revolutionary activity*' (Newman and Holzman 1993). The point of ZPD is to establish a space where students perform beyond themselves so as to make history, not simply knowledge . It is a vision for a new society and a new human being (Newman and Holzman, 1993). In Vygotsky's ZPD all science is revolutionary science and all teaching is revolutionary teaching: in other words, a pedagogy for the avant- garde.

Marx and Vygotsky were overly optimistic about the extent to which the logic of the capitalist factory, and the way in which knowledge embedded within the capitalist machine, would be re-appropriated by workers (Marx, 1993). However, their optimism does not deny the possibility for human intellectual development if the forces of technology and science can be reprogrammed to construct an alternative and sustainable social world within which humanity is the project rather than the resource. Activity is ongoing to redefine the relationship between humanity and technology in, against and beyond the university (Dyer-Witherford, 1999), including the redesign of capitalist labour through hacking and other forms of co-operative working (Wark, 2004), the creation of Open Educational Resources (Downes, 2009; Hall, 2010) and the intellectual collaborations sited within the burgeoning practice defined as the Academic Commons and Commonism (Dyer-Witherford, 2007) .

While Vygotsky was overly optimistic about the development of the capitalist factory, his pedagogical practices have been accepted as part of the educational mainstream. However, while his ideas have been taken on by the learning developers, the revolutionary principles on which they are based have been largely avoided (Newman and Holzman, 1993) The issue now becomes what is the extent to which Vygotsky's work can be re-radicalised and turned to the purpose of social revolution for which it was intended.

Where is Student as Producer?

The purpose of the Student as Producer project is to establish research-engaged teaching and learning as an institutional priority at the University of Lincoln. This means that research-engaged teaching and learning will become the dominant paradigm for all aspects of curriculum design and delivery, and the key organisational principle that informs other aspects of the University of Lincoln's strategic planning.

The underlying purpose of Student as Producer is to intellectualise teaching and learning in higher education, challenging the liberal humanist, and increasingly

discredited notion of the neo-liberal university, to confront its own revolutionary intellectual culture and tradition by engaging with critical social theory (McLean 2006). In the current context this means not simply discussing education as an economic and funding crisis, but also as a political crisis, within which indifference to the political implications of the neo-liberal (enterprise) university is not an option (Vygotsky, 1997).

Student as Producer, and the revolutionary pedagogical practice which it promotes, is designed to interrupt the current consensual discourse about teaching and learning in higher education. This radical interruption of the mainstream consensus is designed as a Brechtian event to challenge academics and students about their teaching and learning practice. The events are designed to be astonishing and are further disrupted by putting into practice Benjamin's deconstruction of the divisive dichotomy between the object and subject of intellectual activity. In the world of Student as Producer the student is restored to the role of creative subject within the academic project. This restoration is consolidated by re-engineering the relationship between undergraduate teaching and academic research as part of a progressive political event. In Vygotskian terms this means redesigning the process of academic production by connecting intellectual and manual labour in a form whereby the student recognises themselves within the total institutional process of the production of knowledge and meaning.

Those of us engaged with this project are mindful of the need for the university to survive and prosper, (even in a framework for higher education which is – in the words of the Minister for Higher Education – unsustainable) whilst taking on the responsibility with others in the academic community to design an alternative model for the university, as a rehearsal for an alternative social world within which it might subsist. By creating alternative models for higher education Student as Producer is experimenting with the history of the idea of university, drawing on the heritage of higher learning. The purpose is to reinvent the contemporary significance of students and the university so as to provide, as Benjamin (1996) might have it, a real time example of the highest metaphysical state of history.

One such alternative model for higher education can be set within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The current framework for curriculum design in universities is based on the notion of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are not only antithetical to Vygotsky's concept of ZPD, but are also contrary to what many academics regard as a progressive approach to teaching and learning in higher education. Learning outcomes describe a set of key objectives for students designed around a set of prescribed capabilities. Based on the notion of minimum threshold, learning outcomes prescribe what the student is expected to be able to do by the end of a period of study, how they should be able to do this and the level at which they must achieve (Gosling and Moon 2001).

While learning outcomes have been an important aspect in providing a framework to assure the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, there are limits to their effectiveness and of their capacity to enhance teaching and learning in higher education. Learning outcomes can become overly prescriptive, stifling creativity and disempowering students and learners, undermining critical open ended notions of student - centred learning (Ecclestone, 1999; Hussey and Smith, 2002).

Student as Producer, is by its very nature a ZPD. Research-engaged teaching implies ZPD, recognising the importance of creativity and originality in student work, while encouraging students to develop their own critical insights and understandings through interactions with teachers, and appreciating the tensions and complexities: 'the constructive ambiguity', of the learning environment (Lampert, 1985; Maher, 2004; Biggs; 1999; Rust et al., 2003). Student as Producer-ZPD does not set the limits within which the student is expected to achieve at that outset of the learning process, but is open ended enough for the student to perform beyond what they thought they were capable of achieving. The institutional framework within which this is set will be articulated so that the student feels part of the academic project of the institution, in the context of that institution's relationship with the external world. And so, as Brecht's Galileo might have it (2006), inventing a new social universe for experimental enquiry with 'countless centres' and 'a lot more room'.

Revolutionary Teaching?

So in answer to the question 'How do revolutionary teachers teach?' The response must be through interruption and astonishment, experiments with history, deconstructing the capitalist labour process by reconnecting intellectual and manual labour, and by creating Zones of Proximal Development. In other words, not teaching - so that we all might learn.

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