

Commodification: the packaging, shelf-stacking and labelling of learning for sale and exchange

When we use the word 'education' we probably have in mind something more systematic than just 'learning' which never stops happening irrespective of structures, techniques, teachers, policies, initiatives and the passage of time; so that is how I shall use the word: as though by becoming part of an education system learning has become packaged and organised. It will also help me to engage with the theme of commodification which requires some sort of regulated market place (a system) within which to operate.

In order to attempt a definitive work on this subject I would have to go deeply into Marxism, alienation, globalisation, the knowledge economy, marketisation, brand values, privatisation and other related themes. For the purposes of stimulating critical conversation, however, I hope that I can manage without doing that.

One of the problems with questioning or attacking the commodification of learning is that prior to our recent re-identification, re-interpretation and use of the concept we had for so long put up with education as a relatively closed system that was based upon and given to reinforcing privilege: as something provided in varying degrees and by varying means to small, chosen groups, some of whom gained, thereby, unfair advantages.

Education as a privilege carried with it (it still does for many) a graduated air of mystery and of favour granted to a few: the further away and less attainable the goal the greater the sense of mystery and awe. It was like a posh shop to which, even if you had the money to spend, you would feel barred from admittance because you were the wrong sort of person. Some people have even gone to the lengths of changing themselves to look as though they are 'the right kind of person' simply in order to gain for them or for their children admittance to this posh shop; so-called 'faith schools' seeming to inspire parents to extremes of temporary self-transformation. And if, for example, you belong to a generation that was the first of your family to even consider going to a university you may recall a certain social and intellectual self-doubt as you entered a club in which everyone else seemed to know the rules. In fact the words spoken to you as you walked across the stage and shook hands to obtain your degree were 'I admit you' (often said in Latin just to rub it in): having a degree now marked you out as having been permitted to join an elite group with access to a private language of privilege.

So might it be possible that the packaging of learning as an educational commodity or set of commodities that can be purchased directly or by means of winning a state grant was something that had to happen in order to increase accessibility; to de-mystify education; and to introduce more fairness to society?

I am doubtful that this is the case because the increase in the number of people attending university, the extension of the school leaving age and the increase in the number of people engaged in education programmes leading to qualifications have not brought about either increased social mobility or greater social fairness. The more widespread the growth of educational provision the greater the perceived differences between what is provided.

Being a member of society who feels free from the fear of wearing the wrong educational label should surely be a signifier of democracy. We are as far away from that as ever.

We have long had a system of education. It is simply that there have also always been factors that worked within the system to block attempts to make things fair. I am not suggesting that we disregard the part played by knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes in deciding who might benefit from particular educational programmes. It is unfairness and the ready desire to apply labels that is bothering me. The wider and more apparently accessible the educational system becomes the more extensive is our use of labels that mark out the differences between categories: not in the sense that there is a difference between, say, an engineer and a dentist; and not even in the sense of doing comparatively well in an examination; but rather to signify status as human beings.

The more that competition and choice are emphasised the greater becomes the likelihood that by one means or another access to certain desirable educational commodities becomes restricted; or that, should you have the power to do so, making the wrong choice will give you a negative label. The power to choose is, in fact, rarely placed in the hands of applicants. The real problem is how we perceive society (see Essay Number Three: *Stratification*). Meanwhile, let us have a closer look at some of the components of commodification, particularly in education.

Weights and measures

Commodification means that trading can take place. We can exchange commodities because they are packaged and presented in an easily understandable form. Weight, shape and appearance are crucial. In order to make the trade work we need standardised measurements; and my goodness have we got them in education! A programme of study or a module can be measured in terms of time taken, resource requirement and by expected levels of attainment; a teacher can be measured during performance management review and inspection by the use of performance standards; and, of course, a child will be constantly measured. I wish though that the criteria for the measurement of children were more important than the norms in this process because there is a fundamental flaw in a system of measurement that expects everybody to be above average and condemns those that are 'below average'.

This kind of unfairness is built in to the system of public examinations and tests. No matter what we do to improve attainment our early beliefs about 'passes' and 'good passes' and 'failure' remain as ghosts in the statistics haunting both politicians and newspaper editors when they decide whether to celebrate or condemn the work of professional educators.

Even in the days when universities had no idea that they were commodifying education (not all academics read Marx) they found it necessary to invent credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) points and also adopted various means of accrediting prior learning: all of them essential for the exchange of higher educational commodities. And all of them essential if former students were to be able to make claims for their qualifications: claims that affected their ability to obtain jobs and to be paid at agreed rates; claims that also enabled them to embark upon further qualifications. None of this seems to be unreasonable although even if universities may not have made use of, or might even have resented, the word 'commodification' they have always been aware of their own comparative status.

Our system of education now comes complete with weights and measures; and with currencies and rates of exchange. It also comes with targets and policies to achieve those targets; and with regulation and inspection regimes designed to ensure that the market operates as intended. From time-to-time, however, a little bit of old-fashioned mystery is added to the mix in order to enhance desirability in the mind of the potential consumer.

Costing and pricing

So far so good: these days we can work out much more easily what the commodities are worth and because of how the system of assessment works we also know far more than we did about the distribution of value. We know, for example, at what grade we can describe a GCSE result as 'successful' and at what grade we can start to talk about 'failure' (this is despite the lack of any pass or fail grade at GCSE). This provides us with a ready-reckoner to establish the worth of schools and colleges and people.

We might also think that commodification implies a need for some transparency about costing and pricing; and a need for fairness for the consumers. We ought to understand, however, that deciding to set a high price for one commodity and a low price for another, even although both have a similar cost, is not necessarily to do with establishing value by critically examining what the commodity brings to society; or by means of publicly known quality assurance systems; but more to do with establishing value by manipulating the perceptions of consumers.

Why on earth, for example, is a Master of Business Administration (MBA) priced higher than most other masters degrees, particularly those in education? Does

obtaining such a degree mean that British industry becomes so vitalised by MBA graduates that we have full employment and a balance of payments that is the envy of the world? Is the standard higher than for other degrees at this level? Does it cost more to teach? Are MBAs priced on the basis of what they help British industry to achieve for society or what they give the individuals obtaining them? We have learned to perceive them to be desirable and so they bestow better job and remuneration opportunities upon those that possess them. That, I think, is closer to the source of their given value.

Russell groupies; discount schools, colleges and universities; and shelf-stacking teachers

Why do some universities talk of 'double firsts' allowing people to assume that the award has twice the worth of a normal first class honours degree? You have to have detailed knowledge of how university examination systems work to realise that this is an example of a dash of mystique being added to the commodity in order to enhance reputation and increase desirability. The old markers of privilege still count for something. Universities that want the World to know that they are 'searchers after truth' should not be engaging in this kind of activity. But nothing stops them. Although they all work within the same quality assurance frameworks so that degree levels in one university should be given the same value as degree levels in all of the others they have a strong desire to establish a perception of themselves from which they can benefit: a perception that creates a distance between them and others: that makes them appear to be superior. For years Oxbridge wished people to believe that their bachelor degrees were more valuable than those of other universities (they certainly cost the tax payers a lot more) so they allowed graduates to pay a little extra and, without presenting any work for examination, up-grade to masters. Commodification may be a relatively new word for us (pace Marx) but the manipulation of value that goes with it has been around for a long time.

If you think of Oxbridge as the H.E. equivalent of British so-called public schools then Russell Group universities are the grammar schools. I suppose that if you are a member of either group you must consider the rest of higher education to be secondary moderns; get your university into the right grouping and the grants will follow.

If you have spent any time perambulating among the shelves of supermarkets you may have noticed how they are set out neatly, logically and also imaginatively and temptingly: the classifications of goods are given not only in terms of type but also in terms of value and price; even in terms of life enhancement. The managers of the shelf stackers want potential purchasers to perceive a high level of value and quality, thereby enabling the supermarket to attract higher spending customers and to out-trade competitors. Presentation is a key part of this; just as it now has to be for schools, colleges and universities for whom the brochure, the website and carefully placed stories in the local press

not only provide chosen favourable facts for potential customers to digest but also facts that are mediated or spun to enhance the perception of attractiveness. The more attractive a school, college or university can make itself appear to be the greater its power to select the parents whose children will be granted admission. And the more selective a school, college or university can be the greater its chance to out-perform its rivals; or, at least, out-perform them in terms of the rules of the game as drawn up by government and judged by OfSTED and bodies such as the OECD.

Whenever I read about international figures for educational performance I remember the story of a school near one in which I was teaching. They were both secondary moderns. We operated in neighbouring catchment areas and at a time of falling population numbers we were competing for children. The other school entered just one child for O-level; yes, just ONE. That child passed. Great public play was then made that the school had a 100% pass rate. Parents were invited to conclude that if their child was entered for O-level it would pass. I wonder how different this is from the spin put on results by universities and governments. It certainly reminds me to ask questions about context and the stories behind the figures when looking at examination and test results.

So the shelf stackers and their managers had better not make any mistakes: their professional learning must be focussed upon working out how to make the shop look good; anything else is a distraction. Successful achievement of that purpose is the key to pay, pay progression and promotion and also to the avoidance of the consequences of perceived failure. For their line-managers it is even crucial to survival: failure means the sack. So all commodities that are regarded as sub-standard, including the shelf-stackers and their managers (even the customers), have to go into the dustbin round the back or be off-loaded to shops perceived to be more down market: the discount schools, colleges and universities.

Customers

By the way, the word 'customer' may imply someone with purchasing power: someone who has to be wooed and convinced that your 'shop' is the best place for their child; but it is not so simple. Try walking into a bank to ask for an overdraft at the same time as a lottery winner is opening a deposit account. You are both 'customers' but compare the treatment you will receive. You are asking the bank to subtract from its deposits while the lottery winner is giving it the chance to add to or even multiply them. Do you think that your treatment will match that of the lottery winner? Will you even get a hearing? One famous bank used to present itself to the World as 'The Listening Bank' but they listened differently to different customers and tried to become the biggest bank in the World. Eventually, you may find it encourages you to know, instead of simply trying to be a good local bank for local people the Midland Bank failed and was taken over by a competitor (recently taken over by another competitor). You may find it even more encouraging that, just like the railway companies and the

owners of coal mines after the Second World War, banks have recently run to the state for protection from a cut-throat World of their own creation.

This, I am sure, will be the fate of many schools and colleges (and, increasingly, universities) that have bought fully into the commodification culture. They have joined, or allowed themselves to be forced into, a winners and losers game and so must take the consequences of the risks. Being hell-bent on expansion and getting to the top carries costs.

The real cost, however, is borne by society whose children and young people have been drawn into a game that is far more commercial, ruthless, differentiated and de-humanised than it wished for. It is now clear that if you can afford it or wangle it first class is best in terms of the favours it bestows. But if you cannot afford it or wangle it what do you get? Just try depositing an un-wanted child at a choosey school; off you must go to the discount school down the road where you and yours belong.

A qualified confession

Looking back on my time as a school teacher I am sure that without ever using a word such as 'commodification' I often worked to that end: I knew what it took to get good results and I got them. My colleagues would work their way through the contents of an examination syllabus while I would concentrate on the page that detailed the assessment objectives: the part upon which the chief examiner concentrates! Having a good knowledge of the significance and value of commodities such as 'recall', 'interpretation' and 'evaluation', each one of which carried a different tariff, enabled me to pitch my teaching in such a way that in an examination my pupils were more likely to write what counted. And when as an LEA adviser I trained people for the National Curriculum I made sure that they looked closely at the attainment targets and level descriptors because being able to show that your pupils matched them is what got the results. Programmes of Study were interesting but they could distract from the business of getting the desired scores.

I am not rending my professional soul over this. I am sure that on my day I could teach at a tangent and use off-the-wall notions to stimulate interest with the best of them but the need to obtain good results for my pupils and also to bask in the glory of their achievement did colour and, I think, detract from my approach to teaching. At what I think was my very occasional very best, however, I was able to entwine the content and the assessment objectives so that they became powerful instruments for making sense of the subject. In other words, I have not completely lost my belief that a teacher can enter the World of commodities and come out of it with at least some professional self-respect intact.

When Keith Sharpe was my brilliant boss at the University of Liverpool he would counter criticism of the OfSTED inspections that we had to withstand by saying

'It's the only game in town and we have to win it. '; which we did. It was wonderful for me having a boss like that. I felt safe in his hands because the solid foundation he constructed also enabled us to be creative without worrying too much. Indeed, I felt that we became confident enough over the two years of the inspection of accredited CPD to hold intelligent conversations with HMI: to introduce them to the more critically informative aspects of professional learning. I think that what was happening was not simply a case of preparing one set of documents for when an inspector calls and another for when an external examiner calls. Because the subject of the inspection was professional learning I think that we had the chance to demonstrate other, critical, ways of looking at the commodities; and, crucially, we retained in our hands, subject to external examination, all decisions about passes and fails. Without that, and the absence of quotas for expected results, we might have fallen under the power of official and regulatory forces determining what levels of performance are acceptable.

Nevertheless, commodification tends, I believe, to be reductionist and alienating. It does not encourage the exploration and examination of unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes; it does not create conditions in which the accidental discovery of professional penicillin might even be noticed; it does not ask us to formulate difficult questions about what we are doing; it prefers output to outcome and numbers to significance; it thinks management of change is the same as implementation of policy; and it closes minds rather than opens them. What you buy is packaged, counted and labelled and when you are permitted to make a purchase you are also being labelled. Commodifiers find it difficult to package, count and label the unpredicted: the human. If you are the parent of a future Socrates or Einstein do not expect them to respond well to a commodified education. The more you behave as an interesting human being the more you risk being alienated by the system.

Democracy, synergy and greed

Education provided by the State is the form most familiar to most of us. We are aware of the UK's so-called 'public school' system but it has been a part of the scene for a long time and so it is taken for granted and, in terms of how we generally conceive of education, it is almost side-lined. I do not, however, underestimate its influence. What we are not so used to is the increasing role played by private companies in state-funded educational provision. It almost seems to be unnatural. We were simply not brought up to expect that business people could take over a school with the financial support of our government and, ignoring local and national democratic voice, set aside agreements on pay, conditions and the curriculum. Neither do we expect to see private organisations set up or takeover local authorities or universities. They can do this because UK governments have lost the will to practise democracy and because our embracing of commodification allows it to happen more easily.

If you don't use it you may expect to lose it; democracy, that is; and for those that control the Houses of Parliament it is far easier to use the concept of the Crown in Parliament to pass Enabling Acts such as the Educational Reform Act of 1988 which place fantastic amounts of delegated power in the hands of politicians. The result of such acts is that rather than having to painfully negotiate policy through local councils, parliamentary readings and committees all that you need to do these days in order to influence policy is to obtain the ear of a secretary of state or prime minister; and since they have developed a predilection for personal advisors and think tanks selling snake oil we find ourselves suffering from anti-democratic initiatives such as Academies. This fits with the leadership culture of seizing the day. Democracy is too difficult for them.

My experience of working with a private company in partnership with a university was, however, good once my university realised that what it was doing had to be costed properly to include everything that it took to work at the level of quality that it set for itself; and once the private company realised that what it was selling to potential students was the opportunity to work at that level: not simply to get a degree. We could synergise.

For a while, furthermore, both partners re-invested disposable income to create a benign ascending spiral of improved quality, leading to increased recruitment, leading to higher income, leading to further investment in quality and so-on. In my view it was the university that failed to understand sufficiently the relationship between these components. If you fail to invest in the improvement of quality; if you break the link between income and the service you are providing; if you adopt short-term thinking; and if the only commodity in which you are interested is money then the business will deserve to fail. Apart from anything else, did we join the education enterprise simply to compile bigger and bigger numbers or did we have something else in mind: a purpose that might have more social significance?

There are some extremely large private education or media companies in the USA that are in a position to approach a UK university with the promise of very large numbers of overseas students needing be-spoke or boutique programmes. And there are members of university senior management teams with greedy eyes bigger than their stomachs that look at numbers first and hope that quality issues will sort themselves out later.

The problem can sometimes be worse than this, however. Universities, schools and F.E. colleges (or, at least some of their senior managers) can also become infected with a corrosive combination of snobbery and the desire for a free lunch. If they perceive themselves to have a low brand value then they wish to be associated with those that they perceive to have a high brand value; and, at the same time, they hope to get it on the cheap. For these reasons they will sometimes reject partnership agreements with competent but unfashionable institutions in favour of the famous irrespective of their ability to do a good job. As

for the notion that they should work hard at building up brand value for themselves and their partners; why would they bother when they think that they can buy an association with it cheaply?

McKinsification: 'no consultation but lots of consultants'; educational medicine men

As commodification has become more prominent so think tanks, consultancies and consultants have emerged. When Alex Alexandrou presented his evaluation of the government's decision to reduce by 31% the number of civil servants working in the DfES my reaction was 'No consultation but lots of consultants'. Don't let us forget that, no matter how much tradition may have applied a brake to their efficiency, many of these civil servants, working not only in education, have coped with bullish ministers determined to thrust new policies down unwilling throats; bearish ministers defending their policies from assault on all sides; bemused ministers bereft of ideas; optimistic ministers hoping for the best; nasty ministers looking for someone to blame; and, just occasionally, ministers who respect the people doing the job. The huge reservoir of collective experience, expertise and memory represented by public servants, both local and national, has been drained not to save money and to increase efficiency (consultancies and consultants probably cost more and create confusion) but to serve a different ideal. Commodification means a different approach to politics and government.

There are some people who are in business just to do business, nothing more. They move commodities around, create more markets, help with a little price-fixing here and there but always ensure that some of the money stays in their pockets. If there is an overarching set of beliefs or values in any of this it is that the freedom to trade is paramount. All other values are subservient to this. It is what the Anglo-Saxon World is about: creating conditions for trading that are favourable to itself while employing a rhetoric that resounds with the word 'freedom'. Dynamism is probably the most valued personal quality in this World: things must be made to happen: enter the educational medicine men.

These people have proselytised the cult of leadership, replacing the previous cult of management. Leaders must not only have a clear vision but also a determination to ensure implementation. This can cause a few problems when politicians wish to make their mark. They sometimes have to commission a consultant to have a vision for them.

In response to government's recent proposal that all school teachers shall have masters degrees the Training and Development Agency (TDA) consulted who? McKinsey's! They are the business consultants from the USA accused of advising Railtrack to give money to shareholders rather than to invest in maintenance. They have also provided the training ground for a number of

politicians between leaving university and entering full-time politics. You too must have wondered if some politicians have ever had a proper job.

The particular document produced by McKinsey's and quoted in support of its policies by government is called *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Come Out On Top*. It might be astounding for the assumptions that it makes about what constitutes success if it were not that one of the authors (Michael Barber) claims to have been the author of New Labour education policy and who was given the job by Tony Blair of ensuring that the structures, functions and processes of government at all levels were focussed upon the implementation or delivery of policy: 'delivery' being a word that fits with commodification rather nicely.

It is not so much the policies themselves that are striking (although they are dispiriting) but the approach taken to governance. Following on from Margaret Thatcher the Blairite, and now the conventional, approach to policy making is to hire someone to do it for them (we are now in the World of focus groups and PR and Admen). Ministers or potential ministers find a politically sympathetic and articulate outside expert or company who, once they have been vetted to ensure that they support the grand public rhetoric of the politicians, is given the opportunity to make a pitch and to sweep them off their political feet. Companies such as Price Waterhouse Cooper and individual advisers such as Andrew Adonis are little different from the king's or queen's favourites that we read about in history books. They are not elected but, nevertheless, find a way to obtain the ear of those in power. Sometimes this process has a long prelude which allows the outside expert or company or think-tank to so influence the rhetoric that they have, in effect, written their own job description. Whether the experts are working with an opposition that succeeds to power or with a government that has asset stripped itself of talent and experience they can expect a reward. Sometimes they are brought into government by means of the House of Lords.

When thoroughly captivated the ministers recruit the expert(s) to help with implementation and delivery of the policies that they have devised. There are similarities with religious conversion; the language changes; governments do not govern any more: they look for deliverance. Everything has to be out-sourced, creating layers and barriers between the elected and the electorate. Notions of painstakingly working through the troublesome and tiresome democratic structures of party, local government and parliamentary committees are set aside; senior civil servants with years of valuable experience are given early retirement packages; and any idea that teachers themselves might be allowed to do more than think about the implementation of education policy is never even considered. We are not talking about teacher voice: this is all about listening attentively to the voice of the master; except that the master in the case has been captivated by the very same firm of tailors that gave us the Emperor's New Clothes.

There are six major points made by McKinsey's after their trawl through the World to find the educational silver bullet; they are (slightly paraphrased with my 'asides' in italics) as follows.

1. We must get the right people to become teachers.

In order to know what it means to be one of the 'right' people we must have definition of 'rightness'. Standardisation helps us to construct this definition.

2. We must develop the right people into effective instructors.

We must have definition of what is considered to be 'effective'. Might it be someone who gets good results? We might also ask who is to be instructed, in what and by what means?

3. We must ensure that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

Again, to know what is 'best' we must have definitions. And 'best for every child' could mean labelling and streaming.

4. The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

We must, therefore, be able to define and measure quality.

5. The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction.

We must, therefore, be able to recognise 'improvement' and, by the way, know the difference between output and outcome.

6. High performance requires every child to succeed.

The questions are: what is 'high' and what is 'success'?

This is an approach that is very dependent upon commodification; upon clear targets; and upon a determination by leaders to ensure that policies conceived at the top are implemented by those at the bottom.

Our commodity: intellectual curiosity, other perspectives, transformation and the professional contribution to policy-making.

What I believe that we should be selling: what, if we reflect on it, we, as experts in professional learning, are selling is the social benefit that comes from critical examination of the experience, expertise, interests, concerns and values of

professional educators. This benefit is transforming. It provides other perspectives.

Concepts and Critical Questions

1. Success and high performance

Do we ever stop to ask questions about such concepts? What do they mean? Are they measured fairly? Should such concepts be questioned before they are measured? Who defines success and high performance? What are the consequences of decisions or judgments about success and high performance in education?

2. Effectiveness

Is this concept shackled to 'success' and 'performance' as defined for us rather than by us? Might there be ways of being an effective educator that do not show up on official radar?

3. Instruction

I cannot help feeling that this word should be accompanied by the word 'manual'. It is not a word that has been heard very often in an educational setting in the UK for some years. What might be implied by its use in a paper used to inform government educational policy?

4. Brand value versus social value

Do standards and targets sterilise education and professional learning?

5. Output and outcomes

Can politicians tell the difference? Examination results, for example, are no more than the output of teaching and learning. An outcome is what results may signify in terms of knowledge, skills, understanding and, perhaps, attributes. A government department may produce output in the form of a policy document or even an Act of Parliament but it is not until we have made sense of what happens as a result that we can know the significance of the outcome. Impatience is a problem here. Who has the confidence to tell an inspector to come back in twenty years to see the outcome of teaching? So is there pressure to regard output as outcome?

6. Entitlement

Have we now reached a point where education is an entitlement available for all on an equitable basis? If 'yes' how do you know? If 'no' what do you believe is preventing the spread of a fair entitlement?

7. Implementation

Is the only question that professional educators should ask: 'How are we to do as we are told?'. Should they get involved earlier?

8. Value

Are some parents, schools, colleges, children and teachers given higher value than others? Does fairness play a part in how value is distributed?

Proposition

Respect for professional educators should be gained not because they are able to demonstrate compliance but because they have developed a critically informed and tested professional voice.