The Instrumentalization of Education

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Abstract

This article deconstructs instrumentalism in education and explores how educational spaces are increasingly influenced by the expansion of neoliberal ideals. The neoliberal dedication to an instrumentalist form of education is shown to impact education’s allegiance to humanistic values. This article explores how the lack of state funding reeled corporates into educational spaces as sponsors raised moral and ethical legitimacy concerns in research.

In an age of globalization, education’s voyage into the business world has placed increasing emphasis on training students for employment but not necessarily preparing them to be good stewards of their society and to face the challenges of the future (Nussbaum, 2010). The social sciences are losing their place in terms of research funding and are being replaced by technical training courses in the name of economic gain. This article explores cases where corporate financing of research has raised issues of moral and ethical legitimacy in research. The widening gap between a form of education that advocates profit and one that encourages good citizenship has placed not only learners, but research in a vulnerable position. This article first introduces instrumentalism before presenting some of the instrumentalist agendas at play within educational spaces influenced by neoliberal ideals. It also offers an insight into how corporate sponsors have replaced state funding and impacted the future of research.
The Question of Education

The dispute over the aims and practices of education has been largely between the two rival positions of those who view education as a process of personal development, and those who believe it should meet the instrumental economic need for employment. In the West, Plato’s Republic laid the foundation of education as good citizenship while Aristotle argued that morality and education go hand in hand (Reale, 1990). According to Stewart and McCann (1967), Rousseau made the first comprehensive attempt to describe a system of education according to ‘nature’. More than a century after Rousseau’s assertions, John Dewey (1930) stated that in its most general sense education is the means of the "primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group" (p. 3).

Education’s journey in the West experienced a defining moment when the connexion between knowledge, cultural capital and power came to be explored (Apple, 2004; Foucault, 1977). In Culture and Anarchy, Mathew Arnold (2006) defends knowledge for its own sake, as a way to ask the broad moral and social questions. Foucault (1977), on the other hand, maintains that knowledge and knowledge-based forms of discourse serve as the implicit foundation for the growth and maintenance of structures of power and domination. This view is in stark contrast to the notion advocated by Arnold regarding the importance of knowledge for its own sake. Even though Plato promoted education toward good citizenship, Osborne (2004) contends that schools have depoliticized citizenship by equating “the good citizen with the good person, the man or woman who helps others, respects other people’s rights, obeys the law...and the like” (p. 13).

What is Instrumentalism?

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas sees instrumentalism as the result of the “reification of consciousness”; reification refers to "the structural process whereby the commodity form permeates life in capitalist society [critical theorists are] especially concerned with how reification makes human beings seem like mere things obeying the inexorable laws of the marketplace” (Shaffer, 2009, p. 1). Dewey described instrumental logic as “the belief that makes knowledge merely a means to a practical end, or the satisfaction of practical
needs” (Dewey, Hester, Talisse, 2007, p. 170). Consequently, instrumentalism is portrayed as pragmatic and individualistic with the underlying logic that knowledge is most useful when it is used as a means.

In an effort to depoliticize public education, Lubienski maintains that instrumentalism promotes a form of marketization where:

educational provision is based on a quasimarket model manifested in consumer choice and competition between independent providers. Instrumentalism seeks to liberate and elevate consumer preferences as the paramount concern and—relative to institutional schemes—allow greater ease of entry, operational autonomy, and organizational independence for providers. (Lubienski, 2003, p. 495)

The leeway offered to economic providers may not automatically translate into a privatized production or provision of public education, but the purpose of education tends to move toward individual private ends. As a result, similar to other private economic sectors, commodification changes the “essence” of public education into a privatized good (Kuttner, 1999). Through the marketization of education as a good, it is only natural and perhaps inevitable that “education begins to resemble other such goods that are produced in competitive environments and pursued primarily by and for the benefit of individuals” (Lubienski, 2003, p. 495).

**Instrumentalization of Education**

One of the difficulties in providing a history of instrumentalism is that it has emerged at different times and in different guises. Sixteenth century French educationalist Peter Ramus’ “extreme schematic treatment of knowledge, [and] his businesslike stress on method and analysis” can be considered a highpoint in instrumentalism history (Coyne, 1996, p. 2). The roots of contemporary instrumentalist movements in education can be found in the ideas of early 20th century curriculum theorists like Ellwood Cubberley who viewed schools as factories producing workers for the needs of society:

Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of
twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down. (as cited in Beyer & Liston, 1996, p. 19)

Alex Molnar goes to great lengths in his book, *School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity*, to warn us of the perils of instrumentalism:

Today, across the nation and around the world, the ideal of the public school as a pillar of democracy is being transformed by a wave of commercialism. Commercialism is an expression of advanced capitalist culture and a profound threat to democratic civic institutions. Once held to be a public good that could be measured by their contribution to the community’s well-being, schools have come to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing, and commodities to be bought and sold. (Molnar, 2005, p. 16)

By reducing learners to participants in an input-output system, students are kept from becoming “active, competent, and thoughtfully critical” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 18). MacIntyre (2002) cautions against a market-driven ideology of input-out within educational spheres:

a highly abstract conception of the school as an input-output machine whose activities are to be understood as transforming measurable input into measurable output. Schools are to be rewarded when the ration of output to input is high and the cost of producing that ration is low. Schools are to be penalised when the ratio is low and the cost of production is high. The input consists of the raw material, the entering students. The output is in test scores and examinations results. (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002, p. 4)

Through the gradual controlling of the learners’ expression of rationality and critique, the most important part of schooling has come to be about the student’s lack of existential engagement with the world. Instead of reminding learners of the significance of preserving values and the importance of community, a sense of individualism, competition, and consumption has taken over the world of education.

The dynamics of competition and individualism impel most of the instrumentally oriented students to consider ‘getting a good job’ their primary reason for going to university and getting a degree
American psychologist Robert Sternberg affirms that vocational aspirations have become the top priority in many families:

Education is seen more as an access route ... not so much toward the enhancement of ... learning and thinking as toward obtaining through education the best possible credentials for individual socioeconomic advancement. Education is seen not so much as a means of helping society but of helping one obtain the best that society has to offer socially, economically, and culturally. (Sternberg, 1999, p. 62)

**Capitalism and Neoliberalism**

The founding father of the free enterprise system, Adam Smith, placed the power of the marketplace into the hands of the people and emphasized the equality of all classes in the exchange process and the economic creativity of the individual (Brochers, 1996). The theories of capitalism championed by Milton Friedman are a reiteration of the belief that left to their own devices and free of excessive government control, people prosper and create civilized communities. According to Friedman (1962), the essence of liberal philosophy is in people having equal rights and opportunity but not necessarily equality of wealth. What lies at the heart of the capitalist system is the freedom of the individual and if everyone accumulates wealth in a capitalist system, it is merely considered as a by-product of freedom.

Friedman believed that people’s desire to be free was not only to become wealthy but also to live according to deeply held values. Riseman (1996) describes capitalism as the only system where people can achieve their self-interest. Walberg and Bast (2003) describe capitalism as a market-based economy in which competing providers offer goods and services to willing buyers with only minimal government interference (p. xv). In his capitalist manifesto written in 1962, Friedman set out to redefine capitalism in educational spaces when he stated that far from leading to the effacement of moral and political principles of equality, privatization would restore to private schools their vital roles as civil institutions in a free society and bulwarks against excessive government interference in the education of citizens.

While advocates of capitalism emphasize its aspirations for freedom, its opponents warn of an altogether different outcome. McLaren (2000) draws attention to how capitalism disguises itself as
natural, free and democratic and “announces itself through its business leaders and politicians as coterminous with freedom, and indispensable to democracy such that any attack on capitalism as exploitative or hypocritical becomes an attack on world freedom and democracy itself” (p.32). Capitalism has been naturalized as common-sense reality, even as a part of nature itself (McLaren, 2002).

Meanwhile, neoliberalism has been called ‘capitalism with the gloves off’ (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000) conceivably because business forces are stronger and more aggressive, and they face less organized opposition than before. Paul Treanor describes neoliberalism as:

a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services . . . and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs. (Treanor, 2004, n.p.)

Inside the neoliberal framework, “the state is strategically focused on creating ideal market economy conditions in an effort to promote national economic growth to the supposed benefit of all citizens” (Hyslop-Margison, 2005, p. 65). Neoliberalism encourages pro-capitalist positions including state privatization of the ownership of production means, suppressing the teaching of critical thought that would challenge the rule of capital, and keeping learners compliant while at the same time warranting that educational spaces maintain the ideological and economic reproduction that benefits the ruling class (Hill & Cole, 2001). Neoliberalism has intensified the instrumentalization of education in the form of corporate domination of society through state enforcement of market economy principles (Hyslop-Margison, 2005).

**Corporate Influence in Educational Spheres**

The university’s function as a public domain that fosters the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic citizenship is being redefined as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects (Giroux, 2011b). Ellen Schrecker argues that, “The entire enterprise of higher education, not just its dissident professors, is under attack, both internally and externally” (2010, p. 3). In the midst of all the
warnings, transnational corporations are pulling out all the stops to privatize the socially produced knowledge associated with the educational system. In Canada, the four provinces of Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have employed market-like models in educational spheres. New Brunswick abolished its school boards entirely in 1996 and replaced it with District Education Councils. But these councils have faced problems since their inception. In 2009, three members of New Brunswick’s District Education Council resigned, stating that they refused to remain as “part of a face that is sold to the public as local governance” (Bennett, 2011).

In the early 1990s, a Canadian-based company called Athena Educational Partners attempted to establish a program in public schools called the Youth News Network (YNN). Students would watch a daily classroom YNN newscast of 10 minutes along with 2 1/2 minutes of commercials in exchange for technological equipment. Opposition from a broad range of groups including parents and educators discontinued the program (Blokhuis, 2008). While YNN ceased to exist, corporate business found a new way to invade educational spaces. A 2006 report of a national survey on commercialism in Canada’s schools stated that 32% of schools across Canada have reported the presence of advertising in or on the school. Coke and Pepsi are the two most prominent corporations in schools with advertising venues. The report pointed out that 27% of all schools had an exclusive marketing arrangement with soft drink giants Coke or Pepsi (Froese-Germain, B, Hawkey, C, Larose, A. McAdie, P., & Shaker, E., 2006).

Through the Cold Beverage Agreement, soft drinks have entered university space as well, with many higher education institutions like the University of British Columbia, University of Alberta and the University of New Brunswick (UNB) signing contracts with either Coke or Pepsi. These exclusive contracts mean the only beverages allowed on campus are supplied by Coke or Pepsi. In return, the universities are offered scholarship funds (Plawiuk, 2012). According to Giroux (2003), even university bookstores are now run by corporate conglomerates such as Barnes & Noble, while companies like Sodexho-Marriott, heavy investors in the U.S. private prison industry, run a growing number of college dining halls (Giroux, 2003, p. 186). Pool (2008) states that “corporate leaders are attempting to turn students into amendable employees and educators should resist this intrusion and affirm the broader ideals of a democratic society” (as cited in Whiddon, Clarence, & Whiddon, 2010, p. 1). While educational institutions are seeing an ever-
increasing presence of such institutions, the corporate culture is redefining the historical purpose of education to foster a learning environment to enhance active democratic citizenship.

Moral and Ethical Concerns in Research

Lack of state funding has created a void in educational institutions that the corporations and trade organizations are trying to fill. Hill (2007) believes proponents of neoliberalism and capitalism aspire to achieve three goals in education. The first is the Capitalist Plan for Education to “produce labour power with the skills and ideologically compliant attitudes to develop a workforce from which surplus value can be extracted” (n.p.). Next is the Capitalist Plan in Education regarding how it “plans to make profits out of education” and finally there is the Capitalist Plan for Education Corporations Globally that anticipates Edubusinesses in several industrialized and developing countries “to profit from international privatizing, franchising and marketing activities” (Hill, 2007, p. 205).

For instance in 2006, $7.4 billion flowed from big corporations to agricultural research in the U.S., while in 2005, a third of agricultural scientists also reported consulting for private industry (Richardson, 2012). In another illustration of Edubusiness, the Danforth Campus at Washington University named their life sciences building The Monsanto Laboratory of the Life Sciences after the multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation for bringing more than $100 million of research funding to the University.

Educators are worried over the conflicts of interest that may ensue and potential bias creeping into scientific research. Corporations often dictate research by donating money to universities, and putting their executives on education boards. Clayton (2001) points to the potential perils of a landmark case in university-corporate research partnership:

Novartis, a Swiss-based pharmaceutical conglomerate, would pay $25 million over five years to the University of California at Berkeley. But what the company was to get in return shocked faculty, students, and outsiders alike. In exchange for funding, Novartis would be allowed to sift through the research of the department of plant and microbial biology at Berkeley's College of Natural Resources - licensing up to about one-third of the researchers' output. (Clayton, 2001, n.p.)
There is also fear that “research priorities might shift away from breaking scientific ground to more short-term, product-related efforts. And there is the possibility, too, that the public will lose confidence in higher-education research” (Mercola, 2012, n.p.).

The expansion of instrumentalism in educational spaces calls for a re-evaluation of its shifting-sands sense of moral and ethical legitimacy. Corporate-sponsored academic research is more likely to be compromised and businesses have been shown to censor research results that are in conflict with their commercial interests (Giroux, 2006b). According to Press and Washburn (2000), "A 1996 study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine...found that 98% of papers based on industry-sponsored research reflected favorably on the drugs being examined, as compared with 79% of papers based on research not funded by the industry" (p. 429).

In a high profile case, Canadian researcher and physician, Nancy Olivieri raised doubts about an experimental drug by Canada's largest generic drug maker Apotex, with which she was treating thalassemia patients. The drug company tried to silence her and threatened to sue if Olivieri publicly revealed her fears about the inadequacy of their drug, deferiprone. Despite the consequences, Olivieri informed her patients about the side-effects of the drug. However, not only was Olivieri denied effective support, she was fired from her position at the University of Toronto. Later on, it was revealed that the university was negotiating with Apotex for a huge financial donation (Schafer, 2007).

In another case, the office of the Simon Fraser University (SFU) president announced in 2010 that Canadian mining giant Goldcorp had donated $10 million to the university. In return, SFU renamed its downtown eastside Woodward’s campus, "The Goldcorp Centre for the Arts." This is while Goldcorp's poor environmental track record in South America is under fire. Goldcorp is facing federal criminal charges in Honduras and has been involved in legal battles in Argentina and Guatemala including serious health concerns and labor violations.

In yet another instance, Chevron Corporation awarded $1 million to community development organizations in Richmond, California, the site of one of its oil refineries. Since 2006, Chevron has been in “high priority violation” of Environmental Protection Agency air compliance standards and in 2007, the EPA reported over 900,000 pounds of toxic waste from the refinery. In 2006, Communities for a Better Environment conducted a health survey of
440 adults and 282 children from Richmond and found that 46% of the adults and 17% of the children surveyed suffer from asthma (Climate Change Education, 2010). In 2010, Chevron announced a major expansion of its “Alberta, Canada tar sands projects, which are destroying the environment and severely impacting the health, livelihood and cultural preservation of Indigenous communities living down-stream from this destructive development” (The True Cost of Chevron, 2011, p. 3).

Reflection

In today’s world the exchange of genuine achievement with credentializing as the only acceptable measure of learning and proficiency is as popular as ever. Those who are deemed successful are provided credentials that tend to serve as a gateway to the labor force (Baker, LeTendre, & Goesling, 2005, p. 8). Higgins (2009) adds to the conversation about the instrumentalization of education by reminding everyone that education is more about transformation than transmission.

In this article I have attempted to unmask instrumentalism as it continues to impact educational spaces at a time when more learning spheres are succumbing to the fantasies of the universal in a market-driven world of productivity and profitability. Education’s increasing dependency on funding from corporate sponsors has disabled much of its authority. Education, at its best, provides the symbolic and cultural capital that empowers people to survive and prosper in an increasingly complex and changing world, and the resources to produce a more cooperative, democratic, egalitarian and just society (Kahn & Kellner 2007, p. 440).
References


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