

(Re)Inserting the Subjective “I”: Globalization, neoliberalism & student agency in post-secondary education

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Article abstract

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(RE)INSERTING THE SUBJECTIVE
“I”: GLOBALIZATION, NEO-
LIBERALISM & STUDENT AGENCY
IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, post-secondary education is being reduced to instrumental and economic ends; a significant effect of this is that student agency is undermined. Students are incited to perform neo-liberal values that subvert their willingness (and potentially their ability) to think of their post-secondary experience as anything other than professional training. Neo-liberal values do inhibit individuality and agency within a post-secondary context; however, from a Foucaultian perspective, the dominant discourse can never squelch the possibility of alternative discourses from emerging, thereby unhinging the seemingly cemented reality described above. In the first section of this paper, I will provide a theoretical overview of globalization, its relationship to neo-liberalism and how these have impacted post-secondary education. This overview will enable me to consider a very specific example of how neo-liberal ideology is being manifested in post-secondary classrooms: namely, the reluctance of pre-service teachers to use the first person singular pronoun in their research papers.

RÉSUMÉ

De plus en plus, l'éducation post-secondaire est réduite à une fin instrumentale et économique. Un effet important de cette instrumentalisation est que la capacité d'agent (agency) des étudiants est compromise. Les élèves sont incités à adopter des valeurs néo-libérales qui mettent en échec leur volonté (et potentiellement leur capacité) de penser leur expérience post-secondaire comme autre chose qu'une formation professionnelle. Dans ce contexte post-secondaire, les valeurs néo-libérales refoulent l'individualité et la capacité d'agent; mais dans une perspective foucauldienne, le discours dominant n'est jamais figé, les discours alternatifs permettant de lever l'emprise d'une réalité qui peut apparaître cimentée. Dans la première section de cet article, je vais brosser un aperçu théorique de la mondialisation et de sa relation avec le néo-libéralisme, en particulier au niveau de ces impacts sur l'éducation post-secondaire. Cette vue d'ensemble me permettra d'étudier une manifestation très précise de l'idéologie néo-libérale dans les classes post-secondaire, à travers la réticence des enseignants du pré-service à utiliser la première personne du singulier dans leurs travaux de recherche.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard considers the logic of *performativity* in education. This logic demands that very specific questions concerning the intentions behind post-secondary education be raised and answered.

If we accept the notion that there is an established body of knowledge, the question of its transmission, from a pragmatic point of view, can be subdivided into a series of questions: Who transmits learning? What is transmitted? To whom? Through what medium? In what form? With what effect? A university is formed by a coherent set of these answers.¹

Lyotard asserts that education acts as a social subsystem, instilling ethical, political, and philosophical frameworks (or beliefs). *Performativity*, then, is crucial to education in that it enacts these beliefs, making visible how social values are being disseminated. Consequently, the goal of higher education, specifically, is that the skills that are deemed most important for the functioning of this system are adequately transmitted. The transmission of similar goals, skills, value (and accordingly, worldviews) is beneficial in that it maintains cohesion necessary for the functioning of society. In other words, the transference of knowledge (re)creates social norms and the tools necessary for perpetuating systems already in place. With this in mind, Lyotard inquires, “[I]f the ends of higher learning are functional, what of its addressees?”² In this paper, I will address this question.

Increasingly, post-secondary education is being reduced to an instrumental and economic end; a significant effect of this is that student agency is undermined. Students are incited to *perform* neo-liberal values that subvert their willingness (and potentially their ability) to think of their post-secondary experience as anything other than professional training. Prospects of future employment or monetary gain are increasingly valued over educational practices that pursue open-ended or philosophical inquiry. The closure of the History and Philosophy program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) exemplifies the systemic reduction of fields of study focused on inquiry. History and Philosophy of education considers educational alternatives to econom-

ically driven models of education. It is no coincidence that fields that challenge the current dominant model of education are devalued.

Although this concern is intensifying, it is not a new one. Within the field of education, many thinkers have been exploring the role of the Western university in a postmodern context. There are no shortage of critiques of the ways in which universities have acted as the handmaiden of globalization, serving the needs of a neo-liberal market. Many thinkers have lamented the increased “inputs-outputs” culture adopted by universities precisely because education is currently conceived as a limited and narrow project, thereby ignoring some of the more fundamental issues.

For those who view education as more than a form of advanced training or simply a means-to-an-end, current trends in post-secondary culture is often viewed with a deep distrust and an onslaught of critique. Implicit in these analyses is a depreciation of students’ agency in their own post-secondary experience. Neo-liberal values do inhibit individuality and agency within a post-secondary context; however, from a Foucaultian perspective, the dominant discourse can never squelch the possibility of alternative discourses from emerging and thus unhinging a seemingly cemented reality. In the first section of this paper, I will provide a theoretical overview of globalization, its relationship to neo-liberalism and how these have impacted post-secondary education. This overview will enable me to consider a very specific example of how neo-liberal ideology is being manifested in post-secondary classrooms: namely, the reluctance of pre-service teachers to use the first person singular pronoun in their research papers.

GLOBALIZING PROCESSES

Globalization is often understood as a conglomeration of many networks dominated by neo-liberal economics, which come together to form a worldwide process of cultural, political, and technological homogenization. These accounts of homogenization, ironically, also demonstrate how those individuals occupying positions of power and privilege at a given social, political and historical moment have solidified their authority, while the marginalized are relegated to further marginalized social and economic positions. As Conway and Heynen argue,

Neoliberal capitalism’s particular feat since its emergence in the 1980’s has been to increase social divisions, widen the economic gap between

the very rich and the very poor, centralize authority for the management of corporate and financial capital, elevate “soft capitalism” to a position of unassailable influence in global financial affairs, give monopolistic/oligopolistic privileges to smaller and smaller group of highly corrupt practices...³

Simply put, it is argued that globalization imposes a framework of worldwide categorization; that certain nations, communities, and socio-economic classes are subjected to dramatically different effects of globalizing processes.

An oversimplification of these theories might suggest that the West benefits more than the East and that the North dominates the South. These polarized narratives provide only summary accounts of how these processes affect individuals within each of these categories, ignoring their inherent complexities while also reifying the legitimacy of these constructions. A cursory description of the ways in which globalization is characterized will provide an example of how we often discuss this highly complex phenomena in reductive terms.

‘Globalization from Above’ refers to the grand narrative of globalization, describing its major trends and patterns. Deeply connected to the literature on neo-liberal rationalism, its core premise is that a strong economy will enable prosperity and stability at every level, in all social strata, worldwide. ‘Globalization from Below’ can be understood as a counter-force or a retelling of ‘Globalization from Above’; it can also be seen as a series of critiques. It contests the conviction that neo-liberal globalization is a necessary, naturally occurring, process. It makes explicit the experiences of globalizing processes in the lives of those who are not winning, those marginalized who, due to globalizing forces, have become more indebted, less employed, more disempowered, or all of the above. Just as their labels suggest, ‘Globalization from Above’ or ‘Globalization from Below’ have been dichotomized in scholarly literature. This construction is too simplistic to forge any understanding of how the many layers of globalization have come about as well as how they have been, and continue to be, manifested in modern social life. It is necessary to recognize that each individual (just as each nation) is continually *acting on* as well as being *acted upon* by Globalization(s) from ‘Above’ as well as from ‘Below.’ For example, within the context of this paper, post-secondary institutions and students might be positioned in an oppo-

sitional manner, with students in the subordinate position of perpetually being acted upon. However, a more complex understanding of this situation is necessary. To understand globalization realistically and profoundly, one must see these processes in terms of connectivity or fluidity. Globalization, in these terms, refers to “the rapidly developing and perpetually densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life.”⁴

NEO-LIBERALISM & EDUCATION

William E. Segall defines neo-liberalism as “this century’s reiteration of nineteenth century classical liberalism with its focus on rampant capitalism and an untethered free-market economy.”⁵ This skeletal definition provides merely a brief historical and theoretical understanding of the rise of neo-liberalism without taking into account its messy paradoxes and dangerous hypocrisies. Neo-liberalism is best understood by exploring the cultural impacts of specific economic and political agendas. It is better explained as a set of practices or strategies based on market values and how these strategies regulate all facets of social life. Neo-liberalism represents a cultural disposition. “Individuals who choose their friends, hobbies, sports, and partners, to maximize their status with future employers, are ethically neoliberal.”⁶ Being ‘ethically neo-liberal’ represents an orientation and an internalization of market-based values. It is through these types of attitudes that neo-liberal ideology is perpetuated and normalized. We can see these attitudes flourishing in the media, on television, in films and also in classrooms. For post-secondary students, this internalization can mean anything from expectations of inflated grades to choosing an educational stream that is more apt to produce career outcomes; neo-liberal values shifts students’ expectations of education as well as their attitudes towards it. A result of this process of internalization is that their sense of agency in their own educational experience is distorted.

Nelly Stromquist argues, “It [globalization] reorders fields of study according to the needs of the market, increasingly substituting those needs for the traditional search for truth, [or truths].”⁷ The curricular space within schools undergoes a shift toward market-based priorities in education seeking out practical or commodified ends, infringing on those disciplines dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. Post-secondary institutions present one of the major loci in which the shifting knowledge economy can be experienced.

Education is situated at the core of cultural (re)production. It is a nexus in which all social, political and economic processes are made visible and set out to be (re)produced. In his article, *Globalization and Educational Reform*, Martin Carnoy maintains that knowledge (and by extension education) is the handmaiden of globalization. Two key threads that travel throughout globalizing processes are *information* and *innovation*. Working as knowledge producers, these create ‘information industries’, which travel internationally at high speeds. Carnoy goes on to argue that, “Today massive movements of capital depend on information, communication, and *knowledge* in global markets.”⁸ The portability of knowledge based markets and industries works well with the many processes enacted by globalization(s).

Carnoy’s discussion of the ways in which globalization (in its neo-liberal persona) has had a profound effect on education in the North American context bears strong repercussions for the students in this system. Institutions of higher learning are perhaps the most involved in the creation of knowledge, specifically the types of knowledge deemed valuable in these markets. Consequently, post-secondary students become inadvertently involved in the processes that create market-based knowledge. For example, standardized tests and a focus on math and science are facilitating the comparison of students, schools, and even nations. Standardized tests are notorious for claiming neutrality but are fraught with cultural and economic bias. Similarly, Western science also claims to hold objective data when in fact scientific projects are often products of political issues. The implications of this articulation of the knowledge-economy for education are far reaching; the push toward rational ways of knowing does not only effect education on a macro level but in daily classroom interactions, such as students’ attitudes towards and approaches to their own writing. For example, students are disinclined to engage in ways of knowing that are not objective (inspired by the western scientific and/or neo-liberal tradition). In the following section, I will use Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse to shed light on how, despite neo-liberal impositions of instrumental knowledge on post-secondary institutions, there is always potential to acknowledge students’ agency.

DISCOURSE

In Michel Foucault’s text, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, he uses the term discourse to describe a body of knowledge, how it emerged historically, and its impacts on current societies in terms of dominating power structures. Foucault’s work illustrates how many of our basic assumptions about the social world are, in fact, constructions and not, in fact, immutable realities. While it may be argued that Foucault’s work deconstructed without replacing, or building, it is through this liberation of our most basic ideas that we may begin to question, critique, and build anew. McHoul and Grace qualify, “A ‘*discourse*’ would then be *whatever* constrains –but also enables– writing, speaking, and thinking within such specific historical limits.”⁹ These limits, which once appeared to have been an incontestable reality of modern social life, have been manipulated, molded, and transformed; this fluidity not only effects how we can understand our histories but also how we choose to act upon our future.

Foucault makes an important distinction between big “D” Discourse as a dominating force and many small “d” discourses that compete to actively reshape the dominant Discourse as well as one another. Simply, the dominant Discourse frames groups of statements that are being uttered while, at the same time, those utterances are reshaped and refashioned according to the (dominant) Discourse. A group of statements constituting a discourse are similar, having equal institutional power or coming from coinciding ideological/political positions and are in continual processes of competition over meaning fixation and power.

In a dominant neo-liberal context, competing discourses are often overlooked in educational spaces. The relationship between discourse and education is not limited to a responsibility to insert multiple discourses into classrooms. Rather, we must acknowledge that these discourses are always/already present and that they should therefore be legitimated. While neo-liberalism has had profound effects on students’ willingness and ability to exert personal subjectivity and agency within their post-secondary experience, from a Foucaultian perspective, this is not the only reality. Post-secondary spaces are defined according to the dominant, neo-liberal, (big “D”) Discourse, however they are simultaneously being transformed through the presence of multiple small ‘d’ discourses that are present.

POWER

Foucault's analysis of how power is manifested and transformed in democracies offers another helpful means to understand the nuances of neo-liberalism's effects on post-secondary education. Lynn Fendler points out that Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is wielded through both surveillance and knowledge. For the purposes of this paper, knowledge (and knowledge production) as a mechanism of disciplinary power is particularly relevant. As I explained above, big "D" discourses uphold and maintain conditions of dominant, institutionalized, power. The means through which this power is maintained is through individual acts that legitimate and reinforce these structures. In a post-secondary context knowledge and knowledge production constitutes the main currency; individuals who wish to contribute to and exchange this currency, for the sake of knowledge production as well as personal status are prone to participating in and adding to the types of knowledge that constitute the dominant (big "D") discourse.

The fact that academic fields are referred to as "disciplines," constitutes another example of knowledge serving as a mechanism of disciplinary power. "This meaning of discipline highlights the role knowledge plays in the governing practices of modern democracies."¹⁰ Academic disciplines are more than simply categories or fields of study, they are disciplinary in that they instill deeply rooted perceptions about the world; these perceptions dictate how individuals understand and act in the world. To offer a somewhat brute example, this can be understood as how an educational psychologist and a philosopher of education might differ on how they see the role of teacher neutrality in education; a psychologist may be aligned with the dominant view that teachers ought to be required to maintain an objective position when discussing sensitive topics such as religion in their classrooms. However, a philosopher of education might take issue with the possibility of teacher neutrality, arguing that subjectivity is an inalienable reality, thus making objectivity impossible, from a post-positivist perspective. These disciplinary positions are more than means to navigate professional or academic terrain; they are paradigmatic and they are always/everywhere present. Our disciplinary position provides the lens with which we understand ourselves, the world as well as our role in the world. Knowledge is a mechanism of disciplinary power in the sense that as individuals, we are not physically coerced to adopt certain sets of knowledge (disciplines) over oth-

ers, however there are certain types of knowledge that are privileged and therefore are more attractive to individuals seeking the benchmarks of social success. Despite this attractiveness, the nature of knowledge and knowledge production is that multiple perspectives (small "d" discourses) are always present and are therefore always/everywhere competing amongst themselves and with the dominant position.

THE SUBJECTIVE "I"

As an instructor in a second year undergraduate philosophy of education course, I often encounter the effects of neo-liberal globalizing processes in the classroom. These include obvious examples such as large class sizes, students' desire for immediately practical classroom skills ("yeah, but how can I use this?") or inflated grade expectations. A slightly more complex and surprising example of how these processes are manifested arose when I taught a workshop on writing introductions for essays. I posted an ineffective introduction on a screen and asked students to point out the issues. I expected that they would notice that the scope was too large, the lack of supporting arguments or the poor grammar. Instead, the first student's comment was that, "The author uses 'I'. Many heads nodded in agreement. "Why is this a problem?" I asked. The same student answered, "Because essays are supposed to be objective and if you use an 'I' that means that you're not being objective." This began a conversation that veered far from how to write effective introductions. Based on the comments of the students that chose to participate in this conversation, the consensus was that most students had been told in no uncertain terms that the goal of writing a research paper was to treat the material objectively and to argue from a neutral position; essentially, they had to remove themselves from their writing. When I asked if this was possible, the responses seemed divided. Some students believed that it is not possible but that the rules of academia require it. Others believed that not only was it possible, it is necessary. Otherwise, "how is a research paper different from a short story, or a personal narrative?" These questions demonstrated to me that there was a disconnection between how I understood the aim of writing research papers (intellectual exploration, values clarification, writing skills) and their understanding (mastery of knowledge, articulation of disembodied ("neutral") facts). It also provided a very concrete example of how post-secondary students often view their role in knowledge production as disengaged rather than agentic.

I believe that the general hesitation, or fear, of the first person singular pronoun in research papers is a product of the neo-liberal penchant for rationally acquired, objective knowledge that is flourishing into an accepted attitude toward education. The neo-liberal privileging of positivist epistemologies effects students' attitudes toward their writing and hence their educational process. In a Foucaultian sense, post-secondary students have been disciplined by their field of study. In the field of education, there is an increased leaning toward psychological perspectives, which are more quantitatively based and therefore inspired by western science; psychology constitutes the dominant, Big "D" discourse while philosophical perspectives that see value in the legitimization of subjectivity, constitute small "d" discourses. A neo-liberal perspective seeks immediate and more tangible outcome based education while competing discourses see value in processes of exploring, questioning and critiquing. For these processes to occur in individual identities, positionalities and subjectivities need to be included as a meaningful and legitimate way of knowing, assessing, arguing.

McHoul and Grace have described discourse in the Foucaultian sense as something that enables thinking, writing, speaking; this presumes that the integration of new, or multiple, discourses into classroom spaces enables new types of thinking, writing, speaking. For example, our classroom conversation about the use of the first person singular pronoun launched us into content about feminist and post-positivist epistemologies. Through the advancement of a different way of approaching essay writing, conversations about other ways of knowing and therefore other ways of doing offers an alternative to the dominant (Big "D") discourse were initiated. This probably did not dramatically change students' attitudes about how their education should serve their future career paths or their expectations of "A's," however it did open up a space in which their voices and their experience as readers, writers, and thinkers was legitimized thereby valuing them as agents in their own education.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that although there is a continued pressure on post-secondary students to perform neo-liberal values, which often entails viewing knowledge production as instrumental and/or objective as well as accepting a certain loss of agency in the process of their education. To do this, I have theorized globalizing processes

as firstly, always multiple, and secondly, a web of complex relationships which require an understanding of both macro as well as micro levels (globalization from "Above" as well as from "Below"). I have pointed out that neo-liberalism, inseparable from globalizing processes, is increasingly understood as a homogenizing and instrumentalizing forces, specifically within the field of education. Some perceived effects of neo-liberalism on education are that it reduces educational experiences to commodities and enforces a political rationality on students, thereby diminishing their sense of agency. Although this reality is increasingly present, it is not final or fixed. Discourse, understood as a continued play of language and power, allows a re-conception of realities that are seemingly cemented. Multiple discourses in educational spaces are valuable because they include the voices and perspectives that have been silenced by the current dominant Discourse, the discourse of neo-liberal globalizing processes.

Educational spaces are privileged in that they are determined by social as well as political forces. However, with this privilege comes a responsibility on the part of educators to ensure that, in fact, the personal as well as the economic realms are being fulfilled. Encountering competing discourses broadens a students' understanding of not simply their surrounding, dominant, power structures, but also of themselves. The opportunity to learn for its own sake removes the burden of constant productivity and invites an exploration of issues surrounding one's own, as well as others' identities outside of an economic framework. While the neo-liberal agenda suppresses difference, academic spaces have the opportunity to promote diversity, thereby providing a meaningful counteraction of dominant, neo-liberal, wills.

NOTES

- 1 Lyotard, J.F., *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 48.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 Conway, D. & Heynen, « Towards “fair globalization:” Opposing Neoliberal Destruction, Relying on Democratic Institutions and Local Empowerment, and Sustaining Human Development», in Denis Conway and Nik Heynen (eds.), *Globalization’s contradictions: Geographies of discipline, destruction and transformation*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 227.
- 4 Carnoy, M., « Globalization and Educational Reform», In Nelly P. Stromquist and Karen Monkman (eds.), *Globalization and education: Integration and contestation across cultures*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefields Publishers, 2000, p. 2.
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- 6 Fitzsimmons, P., « Neoliberalism and Education: the autonomous chooser », *Radical Pedagogy*, 4, (2), p. 3.
- 7 Stromquist, N. P., *Education in a globalized world: The connectivity of economic power, technology, and knowledge*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, p. 15.
- 8 Carnoy, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- 9 McHoul, A., Grace, W., *A Foucault primer: Discourse, power and the subject*, Melbourne: Routledge, 2002, p.31.
- 10 Fendler, L., *Michel Foucault*, London: Continuum, 2010, p. 45.