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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

The Myths of Measurement and Meritocracy: Why Accountability Metrics in Higher Education Are Unfair and Increase Inequity

By J. M. Beach
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021, 210 pages
ISBN: 9781475862249 (hardback); 9781475862263 (e-book)

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Anyone who has taught at a post-secondary institution will be familiar with the *Student Evaluation of Teaching* (SET) questionnaire. Towards the end of each course, students are asked to respond to a series of questions where they have an opportunity to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the teaching and the course itself, using a Likert Scale-like measure. For some instructors this is, at the very least, a required nuisance but for others it is a traumatic and demoralizing experience. Beach documents, in considerable detail, the increased use of accountability metrics as a means of measuring the effectiveness of teaching and goes so far as to question whether students receive the education they really deserve. It is abundantly clear to all who have taught in secondary or post-secondary institutions that schooling has been increasingly driven by capitalist and neoliberal ideology. Beach's stance on the value of present-day schooling questions whether students develop "useful knowledge and skills." This depends on how one operationalizes these terms – useful how and for whom? Beach suggests that schools are places where students acquire human capital which might give them access to the work force.

Beach examines what he believes are "the invalidity of three important accountability measurements that have become institutionalized standards in high school and higher education: grades, student evaluation surveys, and the labour market value of credentials." He distinguishes between credentialism and human capital, whereby credentialism does not automatically "represent real knowledge or practical skills" but rather "a cultural currency." The scarcer this credential is, the greater its value. This holds true except for the fact that in recent years there has been a concerted push to get students through the system, especially at the secondary level.

Beach provides a comprehensive historical overview of higher education consumer surveys – a move from relying primarily on instructor grades to determine teaching effectiveness to a more standardized metric in the form of *Student Evaluation of Teaching* (SET). He states, "Despite the pretense of objectivity, social sciences gradually discovered that opinion surveys were not neutral data collection tools. . . the validity of these instruments was questionable from the start" (p. 8). Beach describes in detail the two types of assessment tools currently in use (quantitative and qualitative) and how they are presently used for hiring, tenure, and promotion purposes. In addition to pointing out the evolving rational for their use and how the acquired data is eventually used, he addresses the credibility of the respondents. In this context, the consumer is always right. Paraphrasing Kellerman (2012), the author states, "Student like them as well because they reinforce the broader social and economic trend, whereby citizens and consumers have been taking a more active public role in sharing their opinions about the products and services that affect their lives" (p.16). The question is, are students capable of evaluating teaching and learning? Their present authority comes from the fact that they were consumers of a product, not because they have meaningful/appropriate experience and knowledge of teaching and learning. Therefore, a business model takes precedent, giving the perception of accountability. Beach addresses the issue of "consumer ignorance" and makes the connection to student responders who complete SET questionnaires. What is it that students are really evaluating? According to the author, "student often confuse popularity for confidence or as a marker for quality." (p. 78).

Beach's assumptions are very well researched and supported by research findings of academics, economists, and psychologists – making for a convincing read. Of particular interest to educators is his discussion of two prominent educational theories; Hermann Henry Remmers' Teacher-Effectiveness Theory, and Attribution Theory – how

people attribute feelings and intentions to people to understand their behaviour. Within the context of these two theories, the author discusses how students learn, the perceptions of reality that they hold, and how this impacts their responses when completing SET questionnaires. Beach provides evidence to support the fact that "students' self-esteem has dramatically increased since the 1960s" and that "many students are simply passive parrots playing school to please their teacher and their parents" (p. 22) rather than engaging in the actual work of learning.

In chapter four Beach claims that "if you study the literature on this topic, it is clear that student evaluation surveys are not valid instruments for evaluating teaching, student learning, or the curriculum" and suggests that they are "unfair and discriminatory" (p. 42). The question of validity is important, especially when it involves an assessment tool that has the potential to make or break an academic's career. Beach addresses numerous issues relating to validity – design and construction, bias, and data analysis and believes that "survey questions are political acts." We must ask ourselves, who chooses the content and how is the data used? Seldom is there any attempt to "get behind student responses" to understand why students hold certain beliefs relating to teaching and learning.

In this customer satisfaction climate, should professionals succumb to consumer wishes? To what degree has the focus changed in recent decades to empower consumers? According to Beach "it is clear that school administrators believe that their primary duty is to serve student consumers, especially in higher education where students pay for a significant portion of the education" (p. 85). Psychologist Alison Gopnik, states that schools often "teach children how to go to school and play school, a useless set of skills" (p. 88).

The rise of credentialism and the acquisition of human capital "transformed the labourer from a mere commodity into a newly empowered capitalist who had command over a limited and highly coveted form of wealth: knowledge" (p. 97). While this appeared to be meritocratic, with respect to career opportunities, ongoing discriminatory practices in labour markets and the fact that not all credentials (degrees/diplomas) are valued the same, undermined the myth that all could succeed if they had talent and possessed a strong work ethic. Added to these variables is the fact that a bachelor's degree is not the rarity it once was.

Beach provides the reader with considerable evidence, from a wide variety of sources, to dispel any notion that the present *Student Evaluation of Teaching* is a valid metric to determine the quality of teaching and learning. His criticism is not limited to SETs

but also extends to evaluating the purpose, essence, and outcomes of schooling. “Most students don’t want an education. They endure their prison sentence because they want a fancy, magic piece of paper hanging on their wall at the end of their ordeal” (p. 109).

The evidence presented in this book encourages the reader to reflect on their own educational experience. Despite the bland/dry title, this is an interesting and rewarding read – thoroughly researched and documented. This book should be read and debated by all administrators, full-time faculty, and sessional instructors, who are responsible for teaching and learning at post-secondary institutions.

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