Document generated on 04/23/2024 12:02 a.m.

Philosophical Inquiry in Education

Knowledge as a Public Good : Comments on Special Issue: What is the Good University?

Howard Woodhouse

Volume 26, Number 2, 2019

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071439ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1071439ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Woodhouse, H. (2019). Knowledge as a Public Good : Comments on Special Issue: What is the Good University? *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, *26*(2), 164–170. https://doi.org/10.7202/1071439ar

Copyright © Howard Woodhouse, 2019

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

***Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, Volume 26 (2019), No. 2, pp. 164-170**

Knowledge as a Public Good Comments on Special Issue: What is the Good University?

HOWARD WOODHOUSE
University of Saskatchewan

The articles in the recent Special Issue of *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* are a welcome sign that a growing number of philosophers of education are turning their attention to the functions of the institution in which they work. While there have been innumerable philosophical books and articles about elementary and secondary schools, until quite recently analyses of university education have, with some notable exceptions, been far rarer.

Furthermore, the authors in this collection consider central issues in the nature of university education and research, all of which are conceptually connected to the goods that universities should offer. In particular, they analyze the following: an articulation of the relationship between the epistemic goals of the university and social justice that is not weakened by an over-emphasis on socioeconomic goods (Kotzee, 2018); the promotion of Indigenous knowledge and reconciliation with First Nations, and the extent to which this process is consistent with academic freedom (Tanchuk, Cruse, and McDonough, 2018); the advancement of a service conception of the university as a means to secure educational opportunities for those the market ignores (Martin, 2018b); a capabilities approach to wellbeing in the academy that goes beyond current quick fixes through the use of a philosophical framework that recognizes the distinctive norms and values of the institution (Gereluk, 2018); and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the developmental university in Africa and elsewhere, particularly in how its epistemic goals can be undermined (McCowan, 2018). As Martin (2018a) points out in his introduction, the articles demonstrate in different ways the relevance of key concepts in the philosophy of education: "Authority, epistemic value, political justice, instrumental and intrinsic goods, human flourishing and autonomy" (p.115). To this extent they not only show the relevance of the discipline, but they move discussions away "from rationalization to argumentation" (p.113). The purpose of my commentary is to highlight a central theme of the Special Issue–namely, knowledge as a public good–and to explain the ways in which it is being undermined at universities in Canada.

Foremost in the argumentation referred to above, it seems to me, is a consensus that the knowledge produced in universities is indeed a public good. Kotzee (2018), for example, argues that,

> The important point is that both education's instrumental and intrinsic value work *through* knowledge: by being educated, one comes to know something and, because of what one knows, one then becomes more likely to reap certain instrumental or intrinsic benefits (p.125)

The value of education, he believes, lies in its ability to enhance the capacity of individuals to use knowledge in either instrumental or intrinsic ways. Tanchuk et al., (2018) connect universities' search for knowledge to the public values necessary for citizenship in a liberal democratic society:

> Universities aim to be truth-promoting institutions. A truth-seeking public, then, cannot but value universities and other institutions of higher learning, which serve the purpose of public truth-seeking, on pain of irrationality (p.150)

On this view, the very purpose of university education is tied to the public good. Martin (2018b) goes further, arguing that the state should support the production of public knowledge where citizens are denied access to it by the market:

> Knowledge is a public good, but public goods can be undersupplied. Therefore, the state has reason to step in and subsidize the production of knowledge that can facilitate the attainment of aims or goals overlooked or neglected in the market context. (p.158)

Gereluk (2018), meanwhile, argues that a key role of faculty is to engage in an ongoing dialogue about ideas important to the life of society:

> Arguably, a primary reason for entering the profession is to have the space for conversations and critical thought about the complex ideas that affect our lives and the world around us. A primary role of academics is to cultivate these dispositions as part of the profession (p.178)

Only where knowledge and critical thought created in universities remain a public good can discussion of this kind be sustained. Similarly, McCowan (2018) conceives of universities as places where critical, open-ended inquiry about scientific and social issues enhances human understanding:

> As an institution focused on developing human understanding through open ended inquiry, it [the university] is highly adept at forming critical and methodical scholars who can turn their beings towards solving intractable problems of science and society. It can also—as it has on a number of occasions throughout history—generate ideas or discoveries that profoundly change human life (p.201)

All of the authors agree that a defining goal of university education and research is the public sharing of knowledge among those who seek it in order to gain a deeper and broader understanding of reality.

On this view, sharing knowledge with others is a valuable activity in the context of an institution that enables faculty, students, and researchers to engage freely, and without fear of censure, in the public process of sharing critical understanding. As a shared good, knowledge can only be realized where a community of scholars engaged in critical thought determines the adequacy of its claims. This process of critical inquiry can only succeed where claims and refutations are made public, since knowledge itself is a public good whose value is realized through its being shared (Woodhouse, 2017). Put differently, unless knowledge is shared in ways that emphasize critical thought, its public nature will be at risk.

Furthermore, academic freedom is indispensable to the critical search for knowledge and central to the life of universities. As a distinctive kind of freedom, it enables faculty and students to espouse views and articulate theories that differ from those dominant in their discipline, their university, and/or their society. Dissenting views can flourish because they are protected. Such freedom is contingent upon both

the evidence that can be brought forward in support of these views and a respect for the freedom of one's colleagues to advance opposing theories of truth, value, and reality. Without academic freedom and the institutional autonomy to which it is related, the purposes of university education, scholarship, and research cannot be achieved.[1] Together they make possible critical reflection upon the foundations of all knowledge, which is essential to the health of universities. Such critical thought enhances the growth of knowledge by subjecting every stated knowledge claim to radical scrutiny and by posing questions regarding the adequacy of those claims (McMurtry, 1991; Woodhouse, 2001).

The problem is that it has become increasingly difficult to engage in the public sharing and critical pursuit of knowledge in the contemporary university. As "the state continues to disinvest from the funding of post-compulsory institutions" (Martin, 2018a, p.113), private companies are encouraged to take up the financial slack.[2] Governments and the corporate sector share a common view that universities should contribute to the economy and maximize private wealth resulting in a pincer movement that has caught universities in its grip (Woodhouse, 2009a). As a result of these changes, there is now a consensus that the goal of university education is no longer for the public good but is a private good for which individuals should pay. The effects of this growing consensus have gradually eroded the capacity of postsecondary institutions to ensure that knowledge remains a public good.

It is worth considering how the state and private corporations have cooperated to ensure that the knowledge produced in Canadian universities serves private interests rather than the public good. The formation of the Corporate-Higher Education Forum (CHEF) in 1983, comprised of 25 members from the Canadian corporate elite and the same number of university presidents, provided systemic pressure to conform to the demands of the market (Carroll, 2010). This goal was to be achieved in two ways. First, the plan would ensure that governments defund universities, a process that has encouraged the push towards the privatization of Canadian education, which generates at least $60 billion in revenue per year (Shaker, 2000). By 2009, the federal government would have had to invest $4 billion per year in universities just to return to the funding levels of the early 1980s (Woodhouse, 2009b). Second, it was necessary, in CHEF's own words, "to provide a greater incentive in the university to seek out corporate partners" (Buchbinder and Newson 1991, p.21). Corporations were thereby empowered to redirect university researchers by using funding to leverage research from which they could privately profit, and many academics, especially those in the applied sciences, have collaborated in order to get funds (McMurtry, 2011). It was CHEF that endorsed the federal government's "matching funds" program, thereby strengthening the corporate orientation of all of the Tri-Council Agencies (Brownlee, 2015, p.141). One consequence is that funding from these agencies for research involving partnerships with industry increased from $1.9 million to $37 million in 10 years (Polster, 1998). The market-based goals of this research threaten the open sharing of knowledge that characterizes science and the critical search for knowledge.

Another threat to knowledge as a public good stems from so-called "research-intensive universities" themselves. Fifteen of the largest institutions in Canada have been branded with this title and are currently under the umbrella of the U15, a body whose ideology mirrors that of CHEF.[3] Feridun Hamdullahpur (2016), president of the University of Waterloo and chair of the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, recently welcomed the federal government's re-emphasis on the "Innovation Agenda" because "Canada's research intensive universities are at the heart of this effort . . . and [they] have a significant role to play in the Innovation Agenda" (p.1). Innovation is defined by the government in exclusively economic terms as "bringing new goods and services to market" (Report of the Expert Panel

on the Commercialization of University Research (1999, p.ix). When an expert panel composed of business leaders advocated this market goal as the mission of universities in 1999, there was such resistance from faculty associations that it had to be withdrawn. Now, however, the leadership of the U15 embraces it as the bridge to "a long-term national competitive advantage" in the global market (Breton, 2016). Put differently, the need to satisfy the demands of the market overrides that of the public sharing of knowledge.

Despite the existence of these powerful external and internal forces, as long as universities engage in the pursuit of knowledge as a public good, there is a possibility that private interests cannot completely overrun them. Kotzee (2018) suggests that one way in which this can be achieved is for universities to make the knowledge it produces accessible to the general public

> the university is already well-placed to disseminate its research and … Arguably, the university can do much more to target the general public … making sure that its research conducted in the public interest is communicated effectively to that public (p.126)

This process is capable of "educating people to understand the knowledge it disseminates" (p.126) and allows universities to adopt strategies that strengthen links with the public. One such example would be for Canadian universities to develop institutions similar to the Dutch science shops.[4] As Polster shows (Newson et al, 2012), science shops connect citizen groups that cannot afford to sponsor academic research to those faculty and students who can help them solve the various technical, economic, environmental, or social problems they face. Science shops have the capacity to challenge the privatization of knowledge, as research results remain in the public domain. They also bring the university closer to the public by enabling faculty and students to deliver on their public service obligations.

A philosophical justification of such an approach can be found in Horkheimer's essay, "The Social Function of Philosophy" (1942/1999), in which he articulates a conception of knowledge as critique that is consistent with its public nature:

> By criticism, we mean that intellectual, and eventually practical, effort which is not satisfied to accept the prevailing ideas, actions, and social conditions unthinkingly and from mere habit; effort which aims to coordinate the individual sides of social life with each other and with the general ideas and aims of the epoch, to deduce them genetically, to distinguish the appearance from the essence, to examine the foundations of things, in short, to really know them (p.270)

Knowledge, for Horkheimer, is a strenuous intellectual and practical process, whose goal is to overcome received opinion by understanding how individual aspects of social life relate to the dominant images of the age. This involves distinguishing between appearance and reality and penetrating to its foundations. Writing during the 1940s when fascism was rampant, he recognized universities as places where public knowledge was threatened. Applying his insights today involves understanding how universities are thrown into a state of imbalance by an over-emphasis on "high priority" research programs that feed the market, resulting in the defunding and closure of valuable programs in the humanities.[5] Far from being inevitable, such administrative decisions are made on the basis of a value system in which the creation of private wealth overrides the goal of producing public knowledge. In order "to really know" how this process works, it is necessary to critically understand the ways in which market values have come to dominate university life (McMurtry, 1998).

If philosophers of education are concerned with the value of knowledge as a public good, then it is incumbent on us to take seriously the ways in which it has been systematically undermined in university education and research. Otherwise, our theoretical analyses, however sophisticated, will be no more than abstractions that fail to address the concrete problems facing the institution. This would do a disservice both to the discipline of philosophy as powerful social critique and to the university as the one place in which we can practise this distinctive form of inquiry. Sustaining knowledge as a public good deserves no less.

Notes

[1] For further analysis of academic freedom and its relationship to university autonomy, see Woodhouse (2009a).

[2] Docherty (2015) characterizes the privatization of knowledge as "a war that is being waged *against* the university" (p.5). In the United Kingdom, the war was waged on two fronts in 2010: "the costs of university tuition were substantially transferred into private hands as a government – for the first time – required the students of its nation to become massively indebted personally for a university education. The tripling of tuition fees was accompanied by a systematic withdrawal of all state support (100%) for teaching on arts, humanities and social sciences" (p.81).

[3] The U15 comprise the following universities: Alberta, British Columbia, Calgary, Dalhousie, Laval, Manitoba, McGill, McMaster, Montreal, Queen's, Saskatchewan, Sherbrooke, Toronto, Waterloo, and Western.

[4] According to Polster (Newson et al, 2012), "Some such bodies currently exist, including the Office of Community-Based Research at the University of Victoria and the Faculty of Art's Community Research Unit at the University of Regina" (p.67n.). For an account of how universities in the United States could achieve similar goals, see Boyer (2016).

[5] For some real examples from the University of Saskatchewan, see Woodhouse (2009a), Collins & Woodhouse (2015), & Kreyszig (2019).

References

Boyer, E.L. (2016). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement,* 20(1), 15-27.

Breton, G. (2016). Research is at the heart of the 'Innovation Agenda.' U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities. October 6. http://u15.ca/what-we-are-thinking/research-heart-innovation-agenda (accessed July 16, 2019)

Brownlee, J. (2015). *Academia, Inc.: How corporatization is transforming Canadian universities.* Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Buchbinder, H. & J. Newson. (1991). Social knowledge and market knowledge, *Gannet Centre Journal.* 9, 17–29.

Carroll, W.K. (2010). *Corporate power in a globalizing world.* Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Collins, M. & H. Woodhouse. (2015). The People's Free University: Alternative to the corporate campus and model for emancipatory learning. *Journal of Educational Thought,* 48(3), 117-144.

Docherty, T. (2015). *Universities at war.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Gereluk, D. (2018). Flourishing and well-being: A capabilities approach. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education,* 25(2), 171-187.

Hamdullahpur, F. (2016). Statement — U15 Welcomes Announcement on 'Innovation Agenda.' June 14, 1–2. http://u15.ca/what-we-are-saying/statement-u15-welcomes-announcement-innovation-agenda (accessed July 16, 2019).

Horkheimer, M. (1942/1999). The social function of philosophy. In *Critical theory: Selected essays* (pp.253-272). New York, NY: Continuum.

Kotzee, B. (2018). The epistemic goals of higher education. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education,* 25(2), 116-133.

Kreyszig, W.K. (2019). Movement is dangerous: Let us abide in the old things which have a permanent foundation – Interdisciplinarity embedded within the humanist mode of thinking as an alternative to the dehumanization of the humanities. *Astrolabio: Revisita International de Filosofia,* 23, 288-322.

Martin, C. (2018a). Special issue introduction: What is the good university? *Philosophical Inquiry in Education,* 25(2), 113-115.

Martin, C. (2018b). Political authority, personal autonomy, and higher education. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education,* 25(2), 154-170.

McCowan, T. (2018). The university as engine of development. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education, 25(2), 188-204*.

McMurtry, J. (1991). Education and the market model. *Paideusis*, 5(1), 36–44.

McMurtry, J. (1998). *Unequal freedoms: The global market as an ethical system.* Toronto, ON: Garamond Press.

McMurtry, J. (2011). The university wars: The corporate administration versus the vocation of learning." *Vox,* University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association, March, 1-5.

Newson, J., C. Polster, & H. Woodhouse. (2012). Toward an alternative future for Canada's corporatized universities. *English Studies in Canada,* 38(1), 51–70.

Polster, C. (1998). From public resource to industry's instrument: Reshaping the production of knowledge in Canada's universities. *Canadian Journal of Communications,* 23(1), 41–62.

Report of the Expert Panel on the Commercialization of University Research. (1999). *Public Investments in University Research: Reaping the Benefits.* Presented to the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Science and Technology, Ottawa, Government of Canada: May, 1–34.

Shaker, E. (2000). *Privatizing higher education: Profiting from public loss.* Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations: Fall, 1-47.

Tanchuk, N., M. Cruse, & K. McDonough. (2018). Indigenous course requirements: A liberal-democratic justification. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education,* 25(2), 134-153.

Woodhouse, H. (2001). The market model of education and the threat to Canadian universities, *Encounters on Education,* 2, 104-122

Woodhouse, H. (2009a). *Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market.* Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Woodhouse, H. (2009b). Corporatized universities devalue education. *Toronto Star,* November 15, A21.

Woodhouse, H. (2017). The contested terrain of academic freedom in Canada's universities: Where are we going? *American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* 76(3), 618-647.

About the Author

Howard Woodhouse is Professor Emeritus and Co-Director of the Saskatchewan Process Philosophy Research Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. He is the author of more than 75 book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell, academic freedom and university autonomy, and cultural dependency in Africa. His book, *Selling out: Academic freedom and the corporate market* (McGill-Queen's University Press) was short-listed for a Saskatchewan Book Award in 2009, and in the same year he was given the University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association's Academic Freedom Award. He is a member of the editorial boards of *Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education, Journal of Public Administration,* and *Chromatikon*, as well as a Research Associate of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.