

Consequences of Commodifying Education

By: [Roy Schwartzman](#)

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Consequences of Commodifying Education

Roy Schwartzman, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Roy Schwartzman, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Communication Studies Department, Lloyd International Honors College Fellow, and Director of Communication Across the Curriculum.

Abstract

Ongoing concerns about budgets and accountability have accelerated tendencies to model education after the values of the free market, prioritizing efficiency and customer satisfaction while treating education itself as a commercial transaction. Adopting this framework frays the moral fabric of education and shortchanges students who are configured as consumers to please rather than characters to build.

Introduction

The encroachment of a market mentality into education and other domains continues unabated even amid the backwash of the worldwide economic crisis. “The reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms is one of the most significant developments of our time” (Sandel, 2012, p. 7). More than a decade ago, Naomi Klein (1999) bemoaned the creeping consumerism within higher education, characterized by disengaged students who adopt a “mall mentality” of casually “cruising” curricular and co-curricular offerings (p. 98). She attributed this development to ongoing and intensifying commercial encroachments into a supposedly pristine institutional culture of “quasi-sacred spaces” untarnished by corporate incursions. Klein failed to notice a more persistent and permanent commercial colonization of education: adoption of a market-based, consumer-driven philosophy to guide education.

This essay explores the implications that market-based norms, especially commodification of knowledge and rendering students as consumers, have for educational theory and practice. Analysis of prevalent market-derived metaphors that purportedly describe higher education reveals a problematic conception of educational processes and participants. First, treating education as a commodity overlooks the value of intellectual challenge and exploration by reducing knowledge to quantifiable, job-oriented results. Second, configuring students as consumers prioritizes momentary pleasure over rigor and enduring values. Finally, the amoral marketplace contrasts with the ethic of mutual care that lies at the core of responsible citizenry.

Metaphor Analysis

Metaphors map the course of cognitive approaches toward the phenomena they describe. Kenneth Burke (1969) identified metaphor as a “master trope,” noting how metaphor defines a perspective on reality. Although Aristotle (trans. 1924) contended that “the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor” (1459a.5), metaphors too often master those who employ them. This master trope easily can master thought, especially when a metaphor is adopted uncritically. Indeed, “metaphors undoubtedly stand as an essential tool for investigating our understanding and conception of education with its many components,” since the choice of metaphors crystallizes what we consider essential to the educational process (Kesen, 2010, p. 109).

Metaphors, when firmly rooted, can define the terms of discussion. Once a metaphorically sustained frame of reference becomes reified, it can calcify discourse by disqualifying alternative standpoints that diverge from the metaphoric frame. Thus, if students are consumers and their education is a product designed to maximize their competitive ranking in the global market, then the non-economic aspects of education could dwindle into irrelevance because they do not sustain the metaphoric frame.

Commodification of Education

A market-infused approach to education treats knowledge as a commodity whose exchange value is measured crudely by comparing the cost of acquiring a degree (tangible certification of “product” acquisition) with the financial earnings the degree supposedly enables. Casting aside the causal fallacies involved in assuming a degree provides a sufficient condition for employment, consider the values such an approach entails.

Some of the impetus for commodification comes from administrators and non-academic governing bodies who treat universities as irresponsible, profligate institutions that must be managed. Such insidious suspicion fertilizes what Tuchman (2009) calls an “audit culture,” a mechanical fulfillment of checklists and criteria without more fundamental reflection on how these measures contribute to the social and intellectual enrichment of the students. The ultimate objective of pleasing the students and their parents—conceived as consumers—gives priority to the most concrete, quantifiable results: employment supplants enlightenment. The university’s mission narrows to job training rather than expanding the mind to explore possibilities, solve problems, and find creative expression beyond and across professional roles bounded by job descriptions.

This mentality is encouraged by administrators who conceive and conduct university operations as if they were vocational centers for finding jobs, overlooking or suppressing a view of the university as a developmental center for finding self, connecting with others, and discovering new ideas (Ginsberg, 2011). The contrast between finding a predefined job and discovering what has not been determined encapsulates how some policymakers bifurcate practical versus intellectual labor. This narrow vision of education, caricaturing academics as irrelevant effetes, plays especially well amid moribund economies that harbor residual resentment toward the decline of blue-collar employment. The following examples demonstrate how commodification expands beyond a metaphor to become a basis for policy.

Shortly after his 2012 election as governor of North Carolina, Pat McCrory expressed the essential mindset of commodified education. In a nationally broadcast radio interview less than one month after his swearing in, McCrory voiced concern over the “educational elite” that failed to prepare students for jobs (Stancill & Frank, 2013). He recommended that state universities be funded based on the job placement rates of their graduates.

In Texas, a similar conflict between the vocational orientation of Governor Rick Perry and the educational mission of the state’s flagship university was labeled “a pointed clash of cultures in higher education” (Pope, 2013). As in North Carolina, the presumed irrelevance of higher education’s non-vocational aspects was denigrated as elitist, with the attribution of “elite” employed as a term of ridicule (Pope, 2013).

Such comments reflect a cluster of assumptions and implications embedded in educational commodification. First, commodification restricts education’s task to measurable and often

short-term financial yields. The value of knowledge becomes purely instrumental, a means to employment. The type of person who emerges from higher education becomes an issue only to the extent that it might affect employability. Educating the whole person amounts to a mere rhetorical flourish in an environment wherein the person is reduced to a worker—or, more accurately, to a statistic that might reduce a state's unemployment rate.

Second, the very concept of commodification encourages catering to students, pleasing them by minimizing challenges rather than equipping them to persevere in solving complex problems. Etymologically, “commodify” derives from the Latin term meaning “convenience,” as in “commodious.” What kind of preparation for life's challenges does an education provide that measures quality primarily by the degree of ease and convenience? Critics such as Ritzer (1996) observe that educational efficiency and quality are not coextensive. He analogizes that fast foods might qualify as efficient, but they sacrifice nutritional value.

Lamentations notwithstanding, the commodification of higher education does not deserve total condemnation. It does call attention to various stakeholders—administrators, parents, community members, donors, alumni, and others—often excluded or ignored by standard pedagogical practice (Doherty, 1997). One reason the transactional framework enjoys ascendancy in difficult economic times is that it places a premium on assessment, usually rendered as “accountability” (itself a term with kinship to financial transactions). Consequently, understanding the mindset and mastering the discourse of commodification enable academic institutions to collect and present data that can quantify their accomplishments and justify their existence. Implemented judiciously, a consumer-focused approach can improve responsiveness to students, identify areas to improve services, and clarify how resources get allocated (Maguad, 2007). Fundamental problems, however, arise from prioritizing the consumer as the central or most desirable role for students.

Students as Consumers

As financial resources continue to shrink, virtually all aspects of higher education are increasingly embedded in the discursive realm of consumerism. This familiar situation has received ample scholarly attention (Cheney, McMillan, & Schwartzman, 1997; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Maguad, 2007; McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Schwartzman, 1995, 2010; Schwartzman & Phelps, 2002). Students are rendered as consumers, with the metaphor becoming reified as the imperative to treat students not as if they were consumers, but as consumers. The educational process is understood as analogous to a commercial transaction: students pay tuition and in return receive knowledge, skills, and a degree certifying qualification for a vocation.

The transactional orientation treats the consumer's desires as ipso facto correct. The primary mission of the consumer-focused model is to “delight the customer” by exceeding expectations (Eagle & Brennan, 2007, p. 45). Consumerism has no interest in customers engaging in self-reflection to question or alter their desires. Although students' desires may be inchoate or grounded only in ephemeral whims, consumer-centered education must respect and fulfill them (Love, 2008). The labor the consumer contributes to education remains unclear, rendering the educational experience a unidirectional process whereby the educational institution (and, by extension, the educators) become mechanisms for pleasing the customer.

One might argue that the consumer metaphor serves a productive purpose by empowering students and thus motivating them to assert greater control over their own education. A cadre of concerned consumers could actually improve educational quality much as consumer watchdogs or labor unions monitor corporations to assure quality and safety. Despite the ample scholarly analysis devoted to consumerism in higher education, rarely does research critically address the type of consumer that the market mentality produces.

In education, the minimalist consumer develops early. Given free choice, even students in elementary school may prefer to minimize intellectual challenge and risk, instead selecting the path of least effort. These young students “may reject approaches that emphasise intellectual quality in favour of repetitive, non-challenging and educationally debilitating work because, although not engaging intellectually, they are able to ‘do’ the task, fill in the worksheet, keep busy and stay out of trouble” (Zammit, 2011, p. 206). Retreating from rigor, students remain in their intellectual comfort zone of less demanding activities. Within the consumer feedback model, lack of intellectual rigor becomes self-perpetuating. If students demand minimal intellectual challenge, then customer satisfaction requires that just as little be offered.

In fairness, few incoming college students have been prepared for exercising critical discernment as consumers. Lacking explicit guidance or background in what constitutes educational quality, students may be uninformed, immature consumers whose preferences should not serve as the primary guide for educational practice (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 171). The self-directed learning patterns that college students exhibit belie the behaviors of discerning consumers. “There are many reasons instead to expect students as consumers to focus on receiving services that will allow them, as effortlessly and comfortably as possible, to attain valuable educational credentials that can be exchanged for later labor market success” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 17). After all, if educational institutions should place a premium on efficiency, then why would students not also prioritize it as their cardinal virtue?

Cultivation of consumerism may carry long-term, unintended consequences for educational institutions. Bauman (2007) notes that consumerism fosters a throwaway culture, wherein anything that causes dissatisfaction is simply discarded and replaced by something more pleasant. Such quick willingness to abandon whatever induces momentary displeasure aptly describes the readiness of students to withdraw from a course (or worse, simply vanish without officially withdrawing) when faced with a difficult assignment. Bauman’s link of consumerism with hedonistic whims may translate into a lack of long-term commitment to a college or university after an education has been purchased and provided. Bauman (2007) claims, “Consumers are not expected to swear loyalty to the objects they obtain with the intention to consume” (p. 21). Lacking loyalty to any long-term value of education aside from its instrumental role in securing a job, students also would have little reason to maintain fidelity to an educational institution (Arum & Roksa, 2011). If education is reducible to a financial transaction, then the relationship between buyer and seller terminates at the point of sale. This lack of long-term allegiance raises serious questions about the extent that a market-centered view of education suffices to sustain financial commitments to the institution when students become alumni.

Care-free Consumers or Responsible Citizens?

Cornel West (2005) voices concern about the predominance of “free market fundamentalism,” the unbridled faith in capitalistic practices as optimal solutions for all social problems. West’s reservations about free market fundamentalism lie primarily with its uncritical adoption of

capitalistic wealth—especially conspicuous consumption—as a substitute for “deep democracy.” This deep democracy contrasts with acquisition and wealth for their own sake. Instead, deep democracy relies on the collective will of the populace to embrace values that maximize the ability of everyone to pursue their utmost potential as unique individuals (West, 2005). Free market fundamentalism casts social relationships as zero-sum competitions. Deep democracy fosters mutual obligations to improve the common lot of humanity. Free market fundamentalism measures success by its production of wealth: the more, the better—regardless of its distribution. Deep democracy measures success by how far the lowest classes, the most oppressed, and the most marginalized become centrally involved in crafting the future of their society. Free market fundamentalism judges accomplishment by the thickness of one’s wallet. Deep democracy assesses achievement by a different yardstick: the depth of commitment to one another. Deep democracy places the public good above personal gratification.

The richest democracy may not be the wealthiest, but the one that enriches values—such as mutual caring and respect—that carry no price tags. Inducing people to care about each other or building a more civil, respectful world simply does not occupy a necessary place in the value system of consumerist culture (Bauman, 2008, 2009). Any sense of care attendant to consumerism has a purely instrumental role of caring about another’s desires in order to satisfy them for some ulterior purpose usually related to bolstering profits or reputation.

Conclusion

Free market fundamentalism poses dangers apart from capitalism per se. Capitalism is not antithetical to values, although it is not coextensive with democracy. The reservations about free market fundamentalism stem as much from its reductionist character as from its chimera of a fair and impartial economic system.

The limitations of a market-centered approach to education become apparent when the commodified aspects of education are treated as sufficient descriptions of pedagogical processes and objectives. “Subjecting a public good like education to commercial logic is generally disastrous,” warns Robert McChesney (2013, p. 52), who argues that market-based values are fundamentally incompatible with education. His attack on commercial values stems from deeper suspicions about the logic and desirability of capitalistic norms for education. First, he notes that the marketplace provides insufficient modes to express the values of education, which cannot and should not be reduced to the financially measured exchange value of knowledge as sheer profit potential. Second, McChesney (2013) classifies education as a “cooperative public service” (p. 93) rather than a profit-seeking enterprise. As a public service, education attempts to maximize opportunities and fulfill the potential of every student even if such efforts prove inefficient. This ability—indeed, mandate—to transcend the values of efficiency and financial profit-seeking distinguish education from business.

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