

2017

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Recommended Citation

McSweeney, Fiona (2017) "The Changing Role of the University: A Discursive Analysis of Good Teaching and Positioning of Academics and Students in Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions," *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

doi:10.21427/D7PH90

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijap/vol6/iss1/3>

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The Changing Role of the University: A Discursive Analysis of Good Teaching and Positioning of Academics and Students in *Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions*

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Abstract

Using the approach of critical discourse analysis this paper presents an examination of the notion of good teaching as constructed in the strategy document *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions*. The aim is to draw attention to, and question how the language used in educational policy documents constructs particular meanings and purposes to concepts such as teaching and learning, as well as creating a particular version of the social relations within educational institutions. This in turn positions teachers and students in particular ways, constructing and limiting who they are and what they do. While contradictory discourses are found about the quality of teaching improvements are presented as being necessary for economic improvement. Similarly contradictory discourses are evident in relation to what good teaching is. However the need for reform is argued. Academics are positioned as passively following an institution-led research agenda, hence uninterested in teaching and in need of training, threats, incentives and monitoring to improve their teaching. Students are positioned as having one choice, to gain the knowledge and skills required for employment.

Keywords: role of university; discursive analysis; good teaching; positioning; academics; students

Introduction

This paper presents a discourse analysis of the strategy paper: *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions* (2013), authored by the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education. This strategy paper was purposively chosen as it specifically focuses on and provides a comprehensive discussion of why and how teaching requires improvement, fitting with the aim of exploring how 'good' teaching can be discursively constructed and how academics and students are positioned in relation to these discourses.

Context

According to Llamas (2006, p.666) there has been a continuing shift in the focus of the role and purpose of higher education in European policy and strategy documents from the liberal academic model, where the concern is with the "development of the student as a person or citizen" towards a neo-liberal model where the student is equipped with skills ready for work. This, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009), argue is part of a marketization agenda based on business principles, where higher education institutions are constructed as sites of preparation for obtaining a job, the value of higher education is measured by its contribution to the economy, and the student is positioned as a consumer. As well as increasing the focus on employability the Bologna process has encouraged the managerialist audit culture in higher education through emphasis on quality assurance mechanisms (Ek, Ideland, Jönsson, & Malmberg, 2013). This is the context in which the strategy is written and is made clear in the introduction to the document by the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, Youth and Sport: "[...] we need more creative, flexible and entrepreneurial young people who are equipped for the challenges of today's ever changing work environment" (p.4) so curricula need to "deliver relevant, up-to-date knowledge and skills,

[...] which is useable in the labour market, and which forms a basis for graduates' on-going learning" (p.5).

Discourse analysis and policy

Discourse analysis is social constructionist, therefore takes a critical stance towards "taken for granted" ways of understanding our worlds and ourselves (Coyle, 2007, p.99). A discourse is a collection of statements that "constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p.258).

When a person uses language they choose particular available linguistic resources "to construct a version of events", not necessarily intentional (Coyle, 2007, p.100). Thus the specific use of words and word combinations is examined when analysing a text. Within discourses there can be variability, inconsistency and contradiction, as different ways of looking at the world exist simultaneously (Edley, 2001), so these need to be examined.

While policy can be conceptualised as something that is devised, articulated, and then implemented, viewing policy as discourse presents it as "part of the dominant system of social relations", which "frames what can be said or thought" (Ozga, 2000, p.94). Educational policy and strategy documents present a particular version of education, which "is connected to broader processes and practices" (*ibid* p.192) and exclude alternative constructions (Foucault, 1972). They also determine the positions that are available to stakeholders in relation to the versions (discourses) presented (Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008) and the relationships between these stakeholders. How educational policy is written "exerts a powerful influence" on how academics construct their narratives of their work (Malcom &

Zukas, 2009, p.496) and determine practices and relationships impacting on how students construct their identities in the institutional setting (Llamas, 2006). As policies “embody claims to speak with authority” (Ball, 1990, p.22) they are particularly suitable for examination using discourse analysis to enable scrutiny and challenge (Hastings, 1998). However, as policies and strategies themselves construct a particular version of the world, the interaction of the researcher in analysing the policy can also be viewed as creating a particular knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Indeed the method of analysis used, critical discourse analysis, itself accepts that “text can be understood in different ways”, although there are limits “to what a text can mean” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, p.67). Hence reference is made to the original document to enable the reader to judge the interpretation.

Approach to analysis

The approach taken to analysing the document is that of critical discourse analysis. Fairclough (2001) states that the basis of for critical discourse is any type of social issue that can be of concern. In this case the issue of concern is the impact of the move towards the marketization of higher education and how this effects on the experiences of those who teach and those who are taught. Therefore, the context in which a text is produced is considered before examining how the text is created through the use of language and the linguistic tools used to present the position. The document was systematically analysed to determine the aim of the language used as well as how it was used, with note taken of the frequency of phrases as well as linguistic tools such as metaphors. This process began with careful reading of the document and the organisation of its content into themes or categories in relation to the subject of teaching, with phrases and sentences applicable to each theme noted. Then the structure of sentences and use of words was examined to determine what they were construing, the argument being presented and evidence of any contradiction. The use of

metaphors in relation to teaching was then noted. This approach has been used to analyse policy documents in relation to early education (Kiersey, 2009), inclusive educational policies (Liasidou, 2008) and is becoming an increasingly popular way to approach the analysis of educational policy (Rogers et al., 2016).

Document's aim

The stated aim of the document is to make “realistic and transferable recommendations” (p.22) to “encourage and incentivise best practice in teaching and learning” (p.14) for the benefit of all stakeholders, both within and outside higher education institutions. This is to meet the challenges of demographic changes, competition from other countries, economic crises and unemployment. The need to increase and widen participation rates in line with the European Commission’s aim of increasing the number of graduates to meet the needs of the labour market (European Commission, 2011), when resources are scarce, makes improving the quality of teaching “even more urgent” (p.12). So the quality of teaching is presented as the solution to the needs of Europe and constructed as the problem with higher education as opposed to alternative factors. The use of the words “realistic” and “transferable” is important to indicate that the changes proposed are not abstract but can be implemented for the desired improvement without significant change to the institutions and the teachers and learners.

The current state of teaching – why change is needed?

In the introduction of the document the argument is presented that, at least up to 1997, the model of higher education was based on an 19th century one, described as lecturing to the elite few who wished to acquire knowledge, with implications of it being no longer fit for purpose. The participation rate of the 19th century is given as approximately 2% but no figures are given for 1997, perhaps to create the impression that the figure is similar (in 1995

the participation rate for the EU19 is 18% according to Education at a Glance, 2007). Later in the document, in the context of a discussion on a focus on research being a barrier to “quality teaching and learning” the contradictory need to “go back to that basic core value, to see again and clearly how important teaching is” (p. 22) is expressed.

To support the construction of teaching quality being the problem it is described as being currently in the “doldrums” (p.14) and in a state of “torpor” (p.34). Improving it will give the European Union a “formidable new momentum in fact a game-changing lift off that will fit us well for the journey ahead” (p.14). Twice reference is made to good teaching being an agent of “leavening” for the student and wider society (p.15; p.22). When referring to the outcomes of good teaching for institutions and academics similar terminology is used.

Quality teaching will be a “surging uplift” to the individual, the institution and society” and “the invigorating benefits [...] will be felt” (p.34). The image is invoked of stagnant and lethargic unleavened bread (representing teaching) that will launch upwards like a space rocket once its life-giving importance is recognised by institutions and academics in turn making the European Union an intimidating and competitive force.

Although reference is made to other aspects of the higher education environment as being important to guide students and develop relevant skills (p.36), good teaching is the “lynchpin” (p.12). Images are summoned of the wheel of higher education falling apart without good teaching thus it is emphasised and other factors minimised. Good teaching is the “core responsibility” (p.13) of the institution and framed in legal terminology as a “contractual obligation” (p.15) to students. “Poor or mediocre teaching” wastes the students’ “time and money”, perhaps resulting in them not achieving or leaving (p.13). This not only positions the student as a consumer of the educational product but also countries or the EU as

consumers as this poor teaching is “just plain wasteful” of the scarce financial resources available (p.12).

What is good teaching?

The difficulty in defining good teaching is referred to on two occasions. However in one situation it is qualified by noting that there are common factors to “good teaching and learning, regardless of the subject and context” (p.14), contrary to evidence that the discipline area is integral to how teaching is approached and knowledge constructed (Malcom & Zukas, 2009; Quinn, 2012). In the second situation it is presented to counter the possible argument that the complexity and variation in teaching could be used to support the position that academics do not need training in teaching skills (p.18). The risk of having one’s account discounted by others is always present so is protected against (Horton-Salway, 2001). So by openly acknowledging that factors inherent in the nature of higher education teaching make defining good teaching difficult but yet pointing out commonalities they are refuting possible counter-arguments and emphasising their own version.

Good teaching is in opposition to research but yet research informed

Apart from the few “outstanding beacons” who have provided “practical support for upskilling teachers” (p.14) institutions are presented as being more concerned with research than teaching, thus constructing the two activities as fundamentally distinctive. This is in line with the managerialist agenda, contrary to the actual experience of academics (Malcom & Zukas, 2009). Institutions are homogenised with no account taken of the academisation of higher education due to the integration of vocational programmes and the resulting conflicting focus on research (Ek et al., 2013). Academics are positioned as passively responding to this institutional priority where “academic laurels” will be “gained by

participation in ambitious research projects and through regular publications” (p.30). Without “parity of esteem [...] expressed in their systems of rewards, incentives, promotions and priorities” (p.23), “institutional backing” (p.36) and “exciting leadership” which “extends the boundaries of teaching and learning” (p.19) academics will remain disengaged from teaching resulting in the consumer student being “short-changed” (p.30). It is the role of senior management to “spread the message that effective learning focused teaching is expected from all staff (not just the enthusiasts)” (p.26) in line with a managerialist agenda, that imbues management with the “legitimacy to change organisational culture, structures and processes” (Wersun, 2010). Public and private research funders are included in being accountable for the quality of teaching as they must invest in teaching due to its “vital [importance] to the economic and social well-being of Europe” (p.15).

While the overemphasis on research in higher education institutions is presented as being detrimental to good teaching by overshadowing “the core value and seminal importance of teaching” (p.22) this is contradicted by stating that good teaching should be underpinned by up to date discipline specific research, conducted by the teacher (p.19). To encourage the global connectedness of students the teacher should also ensure that students are exposed to international research. As reference to good teaching being “informed by the latest research” (p.13) is followed immediately by stating that the good teacher is “an active learner, questioner and critical thinker” the implication is that researching will contribute to the development of these skills in the teacher and therefore the student. Contrary to the presentation of teaching and research as distinct activities above a constructivist conception of research and teaching is drawn on here (where research is seen as knowledge construction and teaching as the facilitation of learning) to suit the purpose (Simmons & Elen, 2007).

Good teaching will be achieved through training that will professionalise teaching

Once the discipline specificity and disparity of curricula in higher education are acknowledged and their relevance minimised, teaching is constructed as a skill, albeit a complex one, which can be acquired through training. Teaching needs to be acknowledged as a skill (p.30), and its acquisition will be achieved with training and professionalization, to achieve excellence (p.19). Professionalization through training is presented without acknowledgement of the contested notion of professionalism and professionalization (e.g. Evetts, 2003; D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005). Presenting it as a skill that can be achieved through training simplifies and standardises teaching, thereby constructing it as achievable. This fails to account for the emotional component and commitment required as well as “the contested fields of values and political commitments which underpin different pedagogical approaches” and the disputed nature of professional knowledge (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005, p.55). Some research also suggests the relationship between pedagogical training for academics and its impact on student learning is not straightforward nor good value for the money invested in it (Knapper, 2003; Pebble et al., 2004).

Teacher training is constructed as being the solution to any difficulties that could be caused by an increasingly large and diverse student body with increasing student expectations (p.30), thus negating the need for an alternative response to these issues. Its centrality is further emphasised by stating that the “moral and legal obligation to students” is “diluted by the untenable presumption that academic staff do not need training in professional skills” (p.34). Pedagogical or teaching skills are replaced by the term professional skills constructing teaching as the main skill required by academics and any argument that training may not be the solution dismissed as indefensible. The existence of some good teachers, the “enthusiasts” (p.26), is diminished by referring to them as “above-average” (p.23), rather than good or excellent, to support the construction of good teaching as being the result of training.

Apart from the few “beacons” (p.14), the majority of institutions are positioned as not being interested in investing in teaching training. They need to be prodded to do so (p.34) and indeed shamed into doing so by opening this up to public scrutiny through publishing “annually the extent to which academic staff receive training in teaching skills” (p.34). Academics are not only positioned as being uninterested and unable to be good teachers without training but also as viewing training as being beneath them (p.18). They are ‘othered’ in relation to teachers at other levels of the educational system who accept the need for training (p.18; p.30). The reality that not all trained school teachers are effective is ignored (Coolahan, 2003).

While incentives through prizes etc. (p.14; p.23; p.36; p.38) may be a source of encouragement these are not a substitute for training (p.38). Training is also constructed as providing assistance for the academic faced with the “myriad tasks” involved in their work (p.30). Its provision is primarily the responsibility of the institution, promoting the managerialist agenda and limiting the professional autonomy of both institutions and academics (Bottery, 1996; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009).

Good teaching and learning needs to be monitored

Although “good teaching, unlike good research, does not lead to easily verifiable results but consists rather in a process” (p.36), to achieve and maintain quality teaching “internal and external quality assurance” (p.24) methods are needed. This could be considered contrary to the construction of teaching as a professional activity as such managerial mechanisms de-professionalise higher education (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004). While all stakeholders are to be involved in this, (p.23) the role of the student is emphasised.

Although students are positioned as being co-constructors of knowledge with responsibilities in the learning process (p.15), at least after they have been exposed to good teaching which changes their focus on grades (p.18), they are also positioned as being monitors of teachers without accounting for any conflict. The advocated approach to teaching involving students questioning their assumptions and ideas is often unpopular with students (Furedi, 2003; McCulloch, 2009; Zerihun, Beishuize, & Van Os, 2011). Streeting and Wise (2009) argue that this power sharing approach to learning is often too challenging for students. As well as monitoring the teachers, students must engage in process of reflexive self-surveillance (Lynch, 2006) to ensure that they are developing the basis of the skills required in the labour market. No account is taken of students not being able to realise the knowledge and skills required for the workplace nor be capable of reflecting on knowledge acquired for a number of years after graduation (Macfarlane, 2004). The “disinterested”, “disengaged” and “incapable” academic must also engage in self-surveillance to ensure they are providing good teaching and learning (p.19), as this is their responsibility (p.15).

Measurement of the performance of teaching within institutions should be based on national student surveys as well as “credible ranking mechanisms” both of which should be available for public scrutiny (p.34; p.22). Again contradictions are evident. Cocksedge and Taylor (2013) point out that the National Student Survey assumes a teacher-centred curriculum, contrary to the student-centred approach advocated, while the European University Association (2009) warns against a simplistic measurement of quality in teaching instead focusing on creativity and innovation.

Good teaching is 'student centred', and relevant, but to whom?

Student-centred learning is defined as a “shift from imparting knowledge to guiding the student in his or her own learning” (p.40). Here student is positioned as a person with the capacity for choice in what s/he wishes to learn but told that choosing “to learn only procedurally” (p.18) is not an acceptable choice. Thus the ‘correct’ student choice is to self-manage a particular type of learning, such as “understand and apply knowledge” and “engage with new questions” (p.18) and develop skills that will meet the needs of employers, led by the teacher.

Student-centred learning is to be achieved “by defining clear learning outcomes” and assessing students “against clear and agreed learning outcomes, developed in partnership by all faculty members” (p.44) and on graduation provide a “skills profile for potential employers” (p.35). Student choice is thus presented as synonymous with employers’ needs serving the competitiveness of the European Union (p.46). Yet it can be argued that teaching in relation to pre-specified learning outcomes is in opposition to student-centred learning, when it is taken to mean student-responsive learning, where the student is allowed to be involved in the classroom by making contributions and these being responded to (Hussey & Smith, 2003).

Educational input needs to be relevant “to students and the labour market” (p.35). The juxtaposition of students with the labour market again constructs the purpose of higher education as creating employable graduates, in a sense homogenising students. This does not account for the myriad of different motivations students may have for entering higher education nor the many different ideas and insights they may have in relation to the subject

matter. Unless we accept this standard student it becomes impossible to present them with problems of individual importance (p.18) within an ever larger class size.

Good teaching will create good employees?

While reference is made to the role of education in relation to the social good and citizenship (six times), reference to employment is more frequent (22 times). Indeed when reference is made to the “integral education of the person” it is in relation to students realising that they themselves need to learn more to develop their “professional competences” (p.36).

“Quality teaching and learning [...] encourages students to develop [...] both subject and generic skills which they can apply immediately in the real world, especially in the labour market” (p.19). More detail of these skills and qualities are given on pages 13, 32 and 36. These are to be developed through “cooperative teaching and learning methods as well as problem-based learning” (p.40) and to be assessed through “role plays or simulated situations that anticipate what the graduate might encounter later in the labour market” (p.42). Although there is some variation on the marketization agenda as students are not only equipped with the skills required for employment but also need to demonstrate self-awareness and self-surveillance to build on them (Molesworth et al., 2009), the unproblematic transfer of a set of skills or graduate attributes to the workplace is still presented. Rowntree (1987) questions whether it is feasible to reduce professional skills, knowledge and characteristics into specific attributes or competencies while Solbrekke (2008, p.487) argues that performance in the workplace is affected by the varied interests of others, “incompatible epistemic traditions and moral priorities” and multiple “conflicting interests and obligations” both within and outside the workplace.

This decontextualized worker continues from the decontextualized student who is engaged in extra-curricular activities, either inside or outside the higher education institution to develop the necessary “soft skills” required for employment (p.36). This is particularly contradictory when presented alongside a need to widen participation to diverse groups, rather than the ‘elite’ of the past. It does not account for the need for students to be in paid employment to fund their programme nor their responsibility for dependants limiting their available time. The students’ educational experiences are thus conceptualised as “insulated from all that is around it” (Sabri, 2011, p. 664).

To create these good employees employers need to be involved in the design of the curriculum. However Reeve and Gallacher (2005) point out that this can be problematic due to differences in how the concepts of learning and knowledge are understood, as well cultural differences. Knowledges and truths within academic disciplines are often contested and employers may favour particular ways of thinking thus promoting the current status quo (Jameson, Strudwick, Bond-Taylor, & Jones, 2012) rather than advancing and progressing knowledge. Beckmann and Cooper (2004, p.1) also raise caution about producing graduates “compliant to the needs of the market” rather than critical thinkers. Molesworth et al., (2009) warn that if higher education institutions ‘buy in’ to the marketization agenda they will lose their ability to critically comment on it. Another danger of focusing higher education on employability is that potential students will enrol only in courses where employment on graduation is more likely (Tomlinson, 2008) and that investment will be made in priority areas, which can result in a reduction in investment in the social sciences and humanities.

Poor teachers are replaceable

Finally, after discourses on the need for training to improve the quality of teaching and giving it parity of esteem with research, as well as pointing out that “social interaction is a key component of learning” (p.40), we are told that technology has the potential to make teaching within institutions dispensable. This is presented as a threat to “poor teachers” as they are told to “beware” of the threat of “the virtual college which scours the world for the very best teachers and makes them available online to students” (p.48). However it could logically be seen as a way of freeing the research-focused academic from the pressures of teaching and assessing students (p.30).

Conclusion

The discursive construction of good teaching in *Improving the Quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions* was found to centre on its opposition to, yet relationship with research, training and ‘professionalization’ as a solution to poor teaching, maintenance of good teaching through monitoring, good teaching being both student and employer-centred and good teaching creating the good employee. Academics are primarily positioned as incapable of teaching without training, disinterested in teaching as a result of their passive adherence to the institutional demand for research. They therefore shirk their responsibility to students and the well-being of the European Union. The positioning of students is more contradictory. They are constructed as vacillating between being passive in their learning until subjected to ‘good’ teaching, yet capable of judging the quality of teaching. However students are primarily presented as being responsible for the development of the European Union through their economic (and other) contributions as decontextualized and homogenous people.

This document attempts to draw together the academic liberalist and neo-liberalist marketization and managerialist agendas by constructing good teaching as requiring the active involvement of students and students as both future employees and lifelong learners. However in doing so it creates contradictory conflicts rather than realistic suggestions in relation to what good teaching is and the roles of academics and students, contrary to its stated aim.

The usefulness of taking a critical stance and scrutinising rather than accepting higher education strategy and policy documents, particularly when they can be accepted by senior management who buy in to the managerialist agenda (Beckmann & Cooper, 2004), lies in the often negative impact the version of higher education they present has on the day-to-day realities of academics. Encouraging students to be actively involved in their own learning, assessing the quality of teaching and learning, involving employers in the development of programmes and using pedagogical theories to inform teaching and learning can be seen as useful. However the effect of the marketization of higher education and consequent student passivity alongside raised expectations, increasing student diversity and class sizes will not be solved by a particular construction of ‘good’ teaching. Research suggests that changes in higher education policy result in role uncertainty for academics (Harris, 2005), inevitably having a negative impact on them and their work. In addition the increasing demands and variety in the roles of academics that have accompanied expansion and diversity agendas, along with a diminution in resources has been reported to result in both an increase in workload and stress and consequently little energy for innovative teaching (McInnis, 2000).

In conclusion the critical analysis presented in this paper draws attention to the particular versions of concepts such as effective teaching that are constructed by educational strategies

and how this in turn positions stakeholders. This suggests the need for such strategies to be considered in the context of the agenda for a particular construction and consideration of alternative versions by all those involved in higher education.

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