

We Come Not To Praise Business Jargon in Higher Education,
But To Bury it!

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An article referring to the published work of the Nuffield 14 -19 studies completed in the UK recently brings to light, once again, a long standing issue in academia. The article, from the June 9, 2009, Bahrain Tribune by Warwick Mansell, made a strong and well reasoned case for reconsidering the use of business language and concepts in relation to secondary level teaching and administration. You may believe that there is no direct application of their work to tertiary education, yet I beg to differ – strongly.

An initial first observation would be that most professors have been pressed into becoming nothing more than the concept popularized by Mel Brooks of a “Stand-Up Philosopher”. That being: “I coalesce the vapors of human existence into a viable and meaningful comprehension.” I assume you know how that translates?? To see it in another perspective, tertiary education is becoming more entertainment, something like a song and dance routine. What the social commentator / comedian Tom Lehrer would call “a lot of words and music that signifies...nothing!” Further to that point, Lehrer points to our being “Ivy covered professors, in Ivy covered halls”. This environment can exist because teachers are required to meet the “needs” of the student consumer. As one colleague of mine once observed only two years ago: “We pretend to teach, and the students pretend to learn”. Substantive content retention may no longer be the driving force of our profession – the consumer is now able to dictate that we should be a rubber stamp for the degree.

A core question for the Nuffield report was, “what constitutes an educated 19 year old”? This same question can be applied to evaluate any given college graduate or the curriculum that educated them. The Nuffield report points to the influence of business jargon and buzz words as having taken education in a seriously flawed direction. I fully concur with their conclusion.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this jargon problem is the continuous view of the student body and its relationship to the institution as a “customer” focused relationship. Allow me to be eminently clear on this. If you insist upon using business terms to describe the relationship of student, administration and faculty, then do so correctly!

The student is not the customer of the institution! Students are the product of a college or university and the quality of that product determines the quality of the institution. The end user or customer of higher education is your society and the organizations that utilize the knowledge given to your students! Pretending that students are customers has so dramatically shifted the interactions so as to

dangerously erode the quality of the product. A variation on this customer concept is to say your institution is “student focused”. It is fine and arguably preferable to have such a focus, but it does not mean that your institution is student owned and operated! Students are stake holders of your institutions. As such they deserve to have a degree of input on their education. Yet, today they feel they are entitled to the diploma because they pay tuition. Personally I have seen students actively engaged as policy makers and classroom managers.

An article found within the web site “management–hub.com” helps us to visualize relationships in academia:

“What is the relevant environment of a university? Is it is the community, in which the university is located, is it the parents of its student body, is it society as the consumer of its graduates and its research and scholarly output, or is it the professional association of its professors? If we are to understand the forces which act upon organizations as systems, we must be able to specify the environmental origin of such forces.”

The operative questions posed in this short excerpt are consistent with the position that I am taking in terms of seeing the realistic academic relationship and defining the academic organizational culture with appropriate terms in the correct context.

Business terms are being horrendously perverted in order to reinforce a perception rather than to establish cutting edge applications for institutional growth. The perception is that if we (academia) empower students, we create a participative management environment, i.e. everyone has buy-in. You are an institution of higher education and as such must have an academic organizational culture, not a corporate culture.

The question of student as customer is not new. The base argument being supported here was made many years ago. It is deeply disturbing that this debate would still exist. Others far more note worthy than I have spoken to this issue, and nothing of substance appears to have been done within the academic community as a whole. In terms of direct observation of U.S. educational institutions abroad and those styling themselves as U.S. forms of institutions the students have extraordinarily direct influence on the fate of their professors. From personal experience I was once transferred from one campus to another due to the fact that two classes of boys felt I was too tough. The chair acted swiftly to support their “needs”.

The experience related above only places an exclamation mark to the issue. In a posting by Donald MacLeod published in 2007, he quotes Professor Greg Bamber of Charles Stuart University as saying:

"Student evaluations of teaching also give effect to student-customers' control over academic employees, as staff respond by self-censorship and increased responsiveness to student-customer demands. Failure to do so may bring academics into conflict with customers and management, and have consequences for career prospects."

From an article written by Kathy Grayson of University Business, in 2003, a number of perspectives are given on the issue. Of particular note are the words of Kevin Snider, executive assistant to the president for Strategic Planning, Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Indiana State University:

"Customer satisfaction in this day and age usually refers to being able to deliver immediate gratification of needs. Many of our 'consumers' are 18- to 24-year-old students who have grown up expecting their demands to be met 'right now.' To convey to students that they are customers, with all of the 'rights' that implies in today's society, is misleading to them and damaging to the efforts of those directly engaged in the process of learning."

If the function of higher education is education then we need to be clear about just who the people you call "customers" are. These are just 18 to 24 year old young adults, with differing levels of maturity. Are they then mature enough to realistically make any judgment regarding how good or bad their professors may be? Students can estimate what they learned, how they learned it and describe why it appeared to be an effective teaching approach. The goal of evaluations should be to put a finger on the pulse of knowledge retention. Sadly it is often utilized as a punitive tool to justify cutbacks and the surgical strategic removal of "unpopular" professors.

It is our function to teach these young people how to think critically and be responsible. Students having input to the process of higher education does reinforce this mission, but the current trend seems to reflect a more directive role, rather than a learning role. Our relationship with students is one of stewardship and mentor. We are not a business for students; we are a business in the administrative role but not inside the classroom. The lines are being blurred in order to create sustainable enrollment and retention. Arguments that student as customer has student educational interests at heart is blissfully ignorant of the hard realities discussed within a university "business" meeting.

The line of demarcation, therefore, for changing the current paradigm needs to be a clear definition between classroom management and academic management. In simple terms: teachers run the classroom and administration runs the institution. Students do not dictate anything in either environment. It is to this point that institutions need to ask just how effective is their current student course evaluation system for assessing the knowledge retention capability? This is well supported by the organizational behavior concept of "Expectancy Theory".

In short it establishes that a good evaluation will lead to a reward; in this case I get to keep my job. Students that I have had in the last 15 years have learned that their opinion can determine the professional fate of an instructor and they have utilized that power extensively. When I have asked why students would knowingly harm someone's career – the answer is always the same “we are the customer, there can be no college without students!”

It has been said very often that sometimes to step forward we need to step back. Academia needs to honestly and clearly evaluate what it has become in relationship to the historic student / teacher / administration relationship. One would have to wonder what would happen if all college Presidents, Provosts or Deans were to be evaluated annually by students? If a President failed to gain a 70% student approval rating (applied to me at one institution) then that President would have to be dismissed! I believe we would find that the concept of student as customer would quietly and quickly leave the lexicon of academia.

Students must not be seen within the context of business jargon – or any type of jargon for that matter. They and their parents could care less about pedagogies or epistemological anything. They do care about what the outcome will be after four years of education at your institution. How will you be of benefit to them? Some still actually do care about learning. Those that learn care about what can be accomplished with the material they are being taught.

The results of the Nuffield report are as applicable to higher education as they are to the secondary level of education they researched. Academia, at all levels, has placed so much time and effort in to trying to sound good it is consistently and inexplicably losing site of its core mission – to educate young people for success.