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The Idea of Quality in Higher Education: ideology and Bernstein (0209)

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The central purpose of this presentation is to analyse, 'What is the meaning of quality in higher education'? With its focus on 'the quality of teaching and learning', the presentation argues that due to the effects of ideology quality is a reified concept. But this development does not come alone. It comes with profound epistemological and social consequences. Quality regimes are now central to the ways in which higher education is constructed and can result in exclusion and disaffection. With the work of Bernstein as its starting point, this presentation suggests that there is an urgent need to develop theories which will enable us to understand these new givens, thus pointing the way to how a more just higher education system could be structured.

The Idea of Quality in Higher Education: ideology and Bernstein

I. Introduction

This presentation takes a new look at some old questions surrounding the idea of quality in higher education. The presentation does this in two ways. First, whereas most research on the quality agenda takes the form of critique or description (cf. Barnett 1992; Brown 2004; Harvey 2005; Morley 2004; Neave 2004) – this presentation is an attempt to offer a theoretical analysis of the idea of quality in higher education. Second, this paper takes an approach in which the acquisition of knowledge is given equally serious attention (cf. Lyotard 1984; Readings 1996; Young 2008). The quality agenda incorporates a policy process that is central to how higher education systems and curricula reinforce power, pedagogic identities and, ultimately, inequalities (Abbas & Mclean forthcoming; Ashwin 2009; Filippakou 2008).

II. Aims of this presentation

The aims of this presentation are to:

- (a) offer some theoretical tools to stimulate an analysis of 'quality' both as an idea and practice in higher education, and
- (c) establish connections between the quality agenda and issues of inequality in higher education.

III. Assumptions and trends

Higher education is subject to a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors the most critical of which are the relations between the state, the market and the academic community which form the essential environment for debate and policy (Clark 1983). In recent times the key pressures

shaping the pedagogical environment of universities are: massification, new technologies, globalization, 'diversity' and marketisation.

IV. Theoretical tools: ideology and Bernstein

Below we briefly outline the theoretical framework within which our approach to quality as an idea and practice in higher education is set.

Ideology

The focus of this paper is on the quality of 'teaching and learning' and, in particular, the acquisition of knowledge. The question that then arises is: What kind of knowledge is being distributed in universities? Our starting point is that the notion of 'quality', as it is currently used, does not help answer this question. At the very least quality is a set of characteristics that needs to be qualified e.g. 'poor' or 'high' quality or quality of what? We suggest that due to the effects of ideology quality is a reified concept (cf. Lukacs 1971). It appears as a 'natural', unproblematic concept, and its ideological nature is concealed when, in fact, any analysis of the idea of quality in higher education needs to start from the relations and practices behind the quality agenda.

In this paper we take the approach that ideology is a set of effects within and between discourses (cf. Eagleton 1991; Filippakou 2008) and that the debate on quality can be seen as a network of fluctuating discourses (Filippakou 2008). The effects that indicate the ideological character of the quality agenda are: asymmetrical distribution of power, power struggles, loss of voice, naturalness, and reification (Filippakou *ibid*). We also suggest that dominant discourses of quality, such as 'fitness of purpose', although enabling diversity, raise issues of inequality.

In the next few paragraphs we will explain the relations between knowledge, learning and inequalities drawing mainly on the work of Basil Bernstein.

Knowledge, inequalities and Bernstein

Bernstein should be credited for something often overlooked in the critical readings of his work: the attention he gave to knowledge as a concrete resource, which is differentially distributed with respect to access and control. Bernstein demonstrates how knowledge is not only structured in different ways but also structured inequitably. Consequently, knowledge ought to be central to our concerns in university education, and Bernstein laments the absence of scholarly attention to the issue of variation-as-inequality in and through knowledge and learning. As Kress (1993: 29) suggests, 'freedom of choice in cultural, social, political and ethical areas depends on access to the most powerful forms of writing, the most powerful forms and genres in one's societies'.

Bernstein (1990: 176) described the structure of school knowledge as: 'its mode of construction, mode of representation, mode of presentation, and acquisition' while two fundamental forms of knowledge arise from the dichotomy between disciplinary knowledge and commonsense everyday knowledge and the relations between vertical and horizontal discourses (Bernstein *ibid*). Bernstein (2000)

highlights wider issues of social justice and epistemic benefit, and argues for greater equality of access to that 'powerful knowledge', which is represented by academic disciplines.

For Bernstein one form of knowledge is not superior to another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities. However, issues of knowledge raise both issues of 'pedagogic rights' (Bernstein 2000) and give rise to inequalities in higher education. So knowledge and learning in universities can be doubly directed: firstly, towards equipping students with an explicit grasp of the particular forms which characterise dominant discourses in a discipline; secondly, towards developing a critical understanding of the strengths and limitations of such discourses.

The transformation to a fairer society requires transformation of inequalities in the distribution of knowledge resource. But— here is the crux – we know very little about the actual distribution of modes of knowledge in universities and we have only started to understand the complex connections between knowledge variation and the ways in which knowledge gives rise to pedagogic identities.

VI. Implications

The idea of quality in higher education and its institutionalization can be misleading, if not damaging. If we want to understand teaching and learning processes in higher education, we need to discuss issues of pedagogic equality and access to 'powerful knowledge'; it requires attention to what students actually do with 'powerful knowledge' rather than to what we would like them to do.

VII. The origins of this paper

This paper arises out of an ongoing ESRC-funded research project, 'Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in First Degrees' in which we explore the comparative 'quality' of teaching and learning in first degrees in sociology and allied subjects, and is the outcome of an increasing awareness of issues of pedagogic inequalities related to the quality agenda.

VIII. References

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