

Students are not Customers of the University – The Analysis of Marketization and the Metaphor of Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this article, it discusses the marketization of higher education, during which a metaphor of students appears. When students are viewed as customers of universities, the teaching of teachers will be influenced and students themselves will be deprived opportunities of being critical learners. The marketization in Chinese context is specifically analyzed to further demonstrate it is unnecessary to treat students as university customers. Although it will be hard and impossible for higher education to become complete public goods, there is no need to offer students some identities in advance which may cause the deprivation of students' own choices and pure learning motivations. This article argues the unnecessary of viewing students as customers of university and urges more research to focus on students' and teachers' voices about their identities in higher education.

Keywords: marketization of higher education, privatization of higher education, higher education

1. Introduction

It is widely disputable whether education is a public good and if students are customers of universities. Some researchers argue that one of the roles of government is to open the market to private enterprises and minimize their interposition (Harvey, 2007). Moreover, when governments fail to sell public properties to private firms, for enhancing market efficiency, they should create 'quasi-market' which facilitates competition encouraged by economic incentives (Dill, 2007). There are evidences displaying that marketization of higher education is happening globally. Friedman (1962) affirmed that the government intervention in education is positive and the competition in market is capable of stimulating responsiveness and efficiency. In 1997 the government of UK defined students as customers and gradually introduces tuition fees into educational system (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017). In Sweden, higher education also goes through changes due to political reforms and orients towards economic achievements (Ek, Ideland, Jönsson & Malmberg, 2013). Since the introduction of social market economy in 1993, Chinese people began to understand individual values and experienced the changes of higher education because of marketization (Williams, Liu & Qiuhe, 1997).

Through marketization, higher education is generally interpreted by a process of 'commercial transaction' in which lecturers are producers and students are customers (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 271). Higher education institutions (HEI) will assure their reputation and be more responsible for meeting students' needs so that they can attract more students who are sources of revenues (Callender & Dougherty, 2018). It is argued that the marketization of higher education will raise a culture of consumerism not only to institutions, but also to students (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). The consumer culture will propagandize a mode of having, for a degree or a well-paid job rather than being learners (Molesworth et al., 2009; Fromm, 2013; Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2016). Students may be active customers, but as learners, they are passive (Cloete et al., 2006). Although many research reveal that most of students do not view themselves as customers of universities (Saunders, 2015; Budd, 2017; Brooks et al., 2016) and lecturers also refuse to recognize them as customers (Lomas, 2007), governments still prefer students as customers in order to promote competition among universities and guarantee quality of higher education (Henkel, 2000).

When students are described as customers, the concept of degree as a commodity will be emphasized which means that well-paid jobs can be exchanged by degrees and HEIs are no longer places preparing students for future life (Willmott, 1995). This article argues that it is inappropriate to view students as customers of universities. First, there will be a literature review in which I will explore the relationship between neo-liberalism and marketization of higher education. Followed by the discussion in terms of Freire's pedagogy to further explain why it is not suitable to create a producer and customer relation between teachers and students, the changes of Chinese higher education towards marketization will be

used as an example to reveal marketization of higher education in a different context and give some suggestions towards further research.

2. Neo-liberalism and the Marketization of Higher Education

Economically, neo-liberalism is related to globalization at the 'freedom of trade' level (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Globalization is defined as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens, 2007, p. 64). When globalization comes across economy, it represents the production, exchange and consumption of commodities. Although globalization is broader and neo-liberalism is only part of it, globalization is like neo-liberalism's vehicle utilized to manage the economy (Burbules & Torres, 2013). Furthermore, through the process of globalization, neo-liberalism spreads its ideology from 'local practices to globalized social relations (Currie & Newson, 1998, p. 7)'. Since the 1970s, neo-liberalism symbolizes the expanding of market and market-like governance and gradually encompasses all dimensions of life (Peck & Tickell, 2006). As neo-liberalism assumes that it is more efficient to open the market and decrease state's regulation, its purpose is using private sectors to reduce public firms' financial pressure (Hay, 2004) to let higher education market go through privatization, commercialization and corporatization (Kezar, 2004). In terms of higher education, neo-liberalism is consistent with marketization in which 'education becomes a commodity provided by competitive suppliers, educational services are priced and access to them depends on consumer calculations and ability to pay (Qiping & White, 1994, p. 217)'.

According to Canaan and Shumar (2008), there are two elements of neoliberal higher education. First, HEIs compete with each other in order to 'sell' education to students (customers) for gaining profit. Second, HEIs prepare elites to labor market for keeping competition at globally fiscal level. It is hard to define whether neo-liberalism itself is definitely good or bad (Torres & Rhoades, 2006). The competition among HEIs and the concept of students as customer not only can improve higher education's diversity and flexibility, but also can bring about 'new managerialism' which includes performance indicators and league tables that providing information for customers' choices, to be put into use (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). However, most of its interpretations framed in education tend to be about economy. In order to turn students into customers, students need to share interests with the market, for instance, the introduction of tuition fees and student loans (Callender & Dougherty, 2018). It is argued that when students pay for education, they will pay more attention on their choices and learning outcomes and vice versa, institutions will be forced to provide better services. Moreover, deregulation of government control is based on decreasing funding so that privatization will be encouraged in education and educational systems will rely more on market forces (Kandiko, 2010) which indicates that HEIs will seek for external funding through their customers instead of direct government funding (Callender & Dougherty, 2018). The hypothesis is that when government is capable of reducing the spending on education, and institutions successfully complement funds from expanding higher education, the equality and quality of higher education will be reinforced (Brown, 2012). In the free market of higher education, students (customers) enjoy the freedom to choose the best products (HEIs) and universities can self-regulate (Kandiko, 2010). However, the problem is, it is too ideological.

Hill (2003, p. 3) describes neo-liberalism as 'profit is God' and argues that neo-liberal policies are the causes of growing inequalities. One of his impressive and strong expressions is 'Those who can afford to buy clean water do not die of thirst or diarrhea (p. 6)'. Statistically, students' participation in higher education seems not to increase because of neo-liberalism (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Boliver, 2013) and the elite universities still only 'open doors' to students from privileged family (Marginson, 2016). When higher education is changed from public goods into private ones, it turns out to be excludable and rivalrous (Samuelson, 1954) as excludable goods confine benefits within individuals, and rivalrous goods keep consumption from others. Students fail to have equal access to universities and at the same time they are unable to receive all the information they need to make their fully free choices. The reason is that, in order to achieve the whole freedom of choices, students need to gather information, distinguish advertising and analyze the confusing and complex data (Apple, 2005). All these tasks should be based on no market restrictions. However, many policy-makers use educational choices of prospective students and their family to promote competition and raise standards (Brooks et al., 2016). The reality is free market hardly existing in higher education and neo-liberalism tending to erode the quality of higher education in various aspects (Kandiko, 2010). On the one hand, because of the limited funds, HEIs are more willing to educate more students, but with a lower cost (Slaughter, 2001) so they try to expand the size of classes, carry out commercial activities and limit full-time courses (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). On the other hand, HEIs pay more attention on measurable outputs as they emphasize more on performativity by introducing performance indicators and academic audits (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and replacing academic professionals with people who have business backgrounds (Torres & Rhoades, 2006). The universities are oriented from a learning center to 'a business organization with productivity targets (Doring, 2002, p. 140)'.

3. Students Are not Customers

In the above sector, I analyzed neo-liberal theory and the marketization of higher education. Although the concept of neo-liberalism is not necessarily wrong, the goals of neo-liberal marketization in higher education seem impractical to improve equality and quality, which is because the choices of students and operation of HEIs are not completely rational (Baldwin & James, 2000). This rationality mentioned here is defined by other elements, such as governments and policies. When universities are viewed as a pivotal driver in knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and working are the servants of knowledge economy (Brooks et al., 2016), it is argued that this will cause 'moral loss' (Brady, 2012; Ball, 2004; Molesworth et al., 2009). I will use Freire's critical pedagogy to further argue why it is not suitable to view students as customers of universities.

When HEIs pay more attention on performance, they will neglect people's intrinsic worth (Ball, 2004). When financial exchanges are happening in universities, in which students pay for education to exchange degrees for future well-paid jobs, there is a production of consumer experience (Molesworth et al., 2009). Now the 'good education' in higher education is linked with economic growth rather than deep learning for personal transformation (Potts, 2005). There is a direct connection between the number of passes and 'good businesses' of HEIs which urges teachers to only teach students what they need to pass examinations and graduate from universities instead of cultivating them into persons who are critical and reflective (Molesworth et al., 2009). Especially after the appearance of university rankings, HEIs rely more on quantitative outcomes rather than attaching importance to what is valuable to humanity (Lynch, 2006). Freire (2020) calls the learning process in which students are simply received, filled and stored the knowledge as banking education. In banking education, students are viewed as 'containers' (p. 44) and their learning has nothing to do with creativity, transformation and invention. During the marketization of higher education, knowledge is assessed by finance and institutions are evaluated by their awarding certificates and degrees (Kandiko, 2010). When the reputation of universities is deteriorated, it will cause fiscal loss. As a result, HEIs are more willing to prepare students for successful employment which may phase down the development of students' critical thinking and intrinsic learning (Gibbs, 2001). It is argued that when students are seen as customers who pay for educational service and they use it to exchange future occupations, students are isolated in universities in which people only emphasize personal better life and ignore the responsibilities and morality in society (Feinberg, 1995). This is on the contrary to what Freire (2020, p. 56) underlines that in authentic learning 'people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality, but as a reality in transformation'. Students' customer status fails to encourage deep learning, but rests on superficial learning, or in other words, as customers, they are just passive 'vessels' which waiting for universities to offer knowledge without self-regulation, active engagement and critical reflection (Tight, 2013).

In the above analysis and discussion, it is apparent that marketization is happening globally in higher education and Marginson (2016) argues that the component of knowledge will be thinned during marketization as otherwise it means the failure of market. Now teaching in higher education is not only influenced by teachers' own opinions, but also is decided by students' needs and performance indicators (Ball, 2004). When the educational market already exists, instead of just letting students be in the market, it is better to make them informed of the market as this process will acquire critical thinking (Gibbs, 2001). To be specific, students are not just recipients, but can be 'co-creator' who bring their thoughts and capabilities into the market (Nixon, Scullion & Hearn, 2018; Kalafatis & Ledden, 2013). If students' insufficient recognition of external world will cause reality unconsciousness, when students engage critically in the market, they can achieve what Freire calls 'critical consciousness'. After people have gained critical consciousness, they realize reality is a process involving constant transformation and it needs people to intervene as transformers. Rothblatt (1993) also stresses that universities are parts of society that plays an active role in self-understanding of society. Students can further know their real needs to achieve deep learning and communicate with teachers in light of their learning needs. Freire (2020, p. 50) argues that authentic thinking means thinking in reality, not 'in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication' and the relationship between teachers and students is more like learning partners 'who himself taught in dialogue (p. 53)'.

However, just as students do not have fully free choices of education because of market restraints and policies, the teaching of teachers is also influenced by many other factors. It is possible that after students achieve critical consciousness and have the opportunity to engage in the market, they decide to embrace neo-liberalism; for these students, the authentic learning can still be using degrees to exchange profitable future jobs (Jay & Graff, 1995). What I am trying to argue here is that, although Freire's pedagogy is not perfect and there are many restrictions to achieve it, if HEIs and teachers view students as customers or students self-cognize themselves at the very start, it means that both of them accept the customer orientation and it can deprive students' rights of self-knowledge and becoming critical thinkers.

4. The Marketization of Chinese Higher Education

It was declared by World Bank in 1988 that marketization is not only prevalent in developed countries, but also in developing countries and there are evidences indicating that China also goes through the process of marketization in higher education. First, the introduction of tuition fees. During the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949-1976), Chinese education was under rigid control of the state and was used to dominate people with socialist ideas (Mok, 2000). People attended education free of charge and after the graduation from higher education, they would be assigned in labor force (Williams, Liu & Qiuhe, 1997), but since 1997, all students of higher education had to pay tuition fees. With the beginning of economic reforms in the 1970s, Chinese government started to realize the financial role of education and invites private sectors into educational system in order to compensate for the lack of revenues (Mok, Wong & Zhang, 2009). Because of the huge gap between educational resources and people's demand, marketization of education (*jiaoyu chanyehua*) began to form in China and stakeholders are eager to make money from educational market (Ngok, 2007).

Second, the changes in policies. There are two policies symbolizing the fundamental changes in Chinese higher education. In 1985, *the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure* indicated that Chinese government's complete control of higher education was insufficient and the government would devolve some power to institutions and only provide basic guidelines. Then *the Program for Education Reform and Development in China* in 1993 further stated specific instructions in which government encouraged private sectors into educational system and accelerated the marketization of Chinese higher education. The restructuring of Chinese educational system is in accordance with neo-liberal marketization that state reduces funds and control of education and HEIs are responsible for recruiting students in order to use tuition fees to balance payment (Mok et al., 2009). Furthermore, Chinese HEIs also relied on donations from overseas and local government's subsidies (Mok, 1999) due to China's policy of 'Walking on Two Legs'.

Not only Chinese HEIs' marketization process is similar with Western countries', the problems are also alike. Except for the participation of private sectors in education and the introduction of tuition fees, Chinese higher education orients to concentrate on 'results and efficiency and effectiveness, decentralized management environments, establishment of productivity targets and a competitive environment (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, 2013, p. 82)'. Under the control of new managerialism, teachers' work in higher education is valued quantitatively and there is a loss of academic freedom due to performance indicators (Lai, 2010). The marketization of education was initially used as a tool to promote quality education in 1985 put forward by one of the Chinese leaders, Deng Xiaoping (Chan & Wang, 2009), but the quality together with equality of Chinese higher education had little improvements (Ngok, 2007). Chinese higher education was expanded due to the marketization of education as the government was eager to stimulate economy for meeting people's needs by the massification of higher education. However, the expansion of higher education is not beneficial for all Chinese people (Ngok, 2007) especially with the apparent differences between urban and rural areas or key (elite) and non-key schools. The unequal development in Chinese urban and rural areas is a persistent social problem, but the disparity has widened since the economic reforms and open-door policies in the 1970s (Ngok, 2007). Moreover, students with predominant family backgrounds have more opportunities to attend key schools equipped with advanced materials and professional teachers preparing them to enter elite universities, while migrant children who come to cities with their migrant worker parents who themselves are marginal in society, struggle in poor-equipped schools (Ngok, 2007). One person who works in administration office of one Chinese university argues that 'students are strongly motivated to study because they have to pay for the courses'; 'higher education is an investment' (cited by Mok, 2000, p. 116). Although those students who come from poor families can apply for scholarship in higher education, neither everyone can successfully get the subsidies, nor every student can have the equal chances to enter Chinese higher education.

Comparing with marketization of HEIs in Western context, the Chinese one also has some differences. According to Tilak (1991) the types of marketization have three forms. First, the private sectors dominate the market massively and limit public sectors; second, the educational system is mixed by public and private sectors; third, it is called the peripheral private sector (Geiger, 1988) in which the role of private sector is very restricted. The marketization of higher education in China fits in the third type which suggests that the monopoly state control educational market is changed into mixed economy of education, but the role of private sectors is very limited as it is not a fundamental change and the state is still instrumental in educational system (Mok, 1997). It is more appropriate to view Chinese marketization of higher education as a transformation from rigidly centralized educational system to knowledge economy (Li, 1997). Despite the types are different, the marketization of Chinese higher education has similar processes and alike problems with western countries. However, there hardly are literatures in China calling students as customers of universities and viewing education as a commodity which is purchased by students, except some parents and students tend to connect university degrees with future jobs (Mok, 2000). What I want to emphasize is that although there is no need to place students in customer status in advance, in order to face the challenges of marketization, research in light of students' or teachers' voices towards customer status of students are necessary in China. As it is inevitable for China to face similar challenges with Western

universities during the marketization of higher education, researchers need to pay attention on the connection between marketization of higher education and the core purposes of higher education.

5. Conclusion

This essay argues that it is not appropriate to view students as customers of universities from Freire's pedagogical perspective and analyzes the neo-liberal marketization and the marketization of higher education in Chinese context. Neo-liberalism is one of the governance forms working through institutions in which elements are going to make gains actively, responsibly, autonomously and entrepreneurially (Varman, Saha & Skálén, 2011). However, in the educational market, the free choices of 'customers' cannot be guaranteed thoroughly and the problems of quality and equality cannot be solved by neo-liberal marketization. Moreover, as the neo-liberalism promotes economic outcomes, the HEIs will focus more on measurable results and put pressure on teachers which may cause the decrease of educational quality and academic freedom. The marketization of higher education happens globally due to globalization, reconstruction of public domain and prevalence of economic rationality in markets (Welch, 1998; Mok, 2000). China also goes through the process of marketization in higher education, but it is different from Western countries and is not committed to private sectors integrally. Moreover, although marketization of higher education has already emerged in China, literatures and policies seem not to regard students as customers. In order to face further challenges, for instance, there are some students viewing higher education degrees as permission and promise of profitable future (Mok, 2000), researchers are suggested to investigate students' voices in depth.

Students' metaphor as customers is only one of the metaphors and there are other metaphors of students as clients, consumers or even pawns of higher education (Tight, 2013). In recent literature, the conception of students as partners (SaP) has emerged and it provides leaders some opportunities with more space of considering students' roles (Matthews, Dwyer, Russell & Enright, 2019). Hager (2008) argues that it seems that people is not capable of thinking or learning without applying for some metaphors, while Sfard (1998) explains it is the expectations behind metaphors that matter as they endow certain characteristics to target people and the specific choice of metaphors will cause consequences. For students of higher education, the metaphor of customers intends to infuse them that educational process is a product bought by them (McMillan & Cheney, 1996); they are learning for degrees; they only need to pass and graduate, and then they can keep living like this to exchange service or profit; people are individually separated from society, authentic learning and transformation. I argue that neither society and universities, nor teachers and students themselves should 'metaphor' students in advance as this will influence students' learning afterwards. Furthermore, mostly 'students do not want to be considered as consumers, and lecturers do not want to deliver a service (Williams, 2012, p. 148)'. Last but not least, although 'marketization changes who we are and what our relation to what we do, entering into all aspects of our everyday practices and thinking, even our most intimate social relations (Ball, 2004, pp. 24-25)', we need to think it differently as 'a process of transformation (p. 25)' and renew 'ethics, moral obligations and values (p. 25)'.

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