

Chapter 1

Teaching Philosophy in Context: Or Knowledge Does Not Keep Any Better Than Fish

Gillian Howie

Introduction

The term ‘mass education’ certainly has a populist overtone and for some it indicates an opening of educational borders and an assault on privilege. For others, though, it marks the introduction of ‘quasi-academic courses’ and ‘vocational skills training’ into the research-focused university sector. John Patten, as Conservative Secretary of State for Education, rang the first alarmist bells when he warned that to open doors to all and sundry was one way of growing the sector but risked the very excellence on which the sector was built.¹ This concern over the ‘self-destruction of one of the nation’s assets’ chimed with Chris Woodhead’s warning that standards would fall with an introduction of ‘quasi-academic courses’ into the research culture. The point of contention was whether or not the values which define the idea of a university, accepted in the Robbins report and the academic community more generally, were compatible with the provision of a mass higher education. Motivating this argument was the prosaic sentiment that more would mean less and so increased numbers would inevitably lead to a fall in standards.

The account of the development of education from elite to mass and then to universal was first developed by Martin Trow in the early 1970s.² Although initially introduced within an American, specifically Californian, context the term accrued political currency in the UK when Tony Blair announced an aspirational 50 per cent participation target at the Labour Party conference in 1999. As our participation rates reach levels which would suggest mass, even universal, education we might expect to see a convergence between US and UK higher education provision. But this is not the case. Peter Scott outlines four principal differences between the

two: low failure rates in the UK; policy initiatives in the UK which tend towards uniformity; a cohesive academic culture, and a similarity of mission between institutions.³ Indeed, these characteristics strain at the very definition of what would count as ‘massified’ education provision in the US. There are various possible explanations for this tension and, although I draw different conclusions, I find the explanation offered by Scott to be most suggestive. Although Trow’s model of mass higher education presumed that a key role of higher education was to train professional workers and to offer vocational training its main role was democratic entitlement.⁴ Instead, in the UK twenty years later, expansion was driven by the predicted challenges of globalization foreseen in the labour market.⁵

In this paper I shall be arguing that the cramped debate around ‘mass education’ as either a tool for social inclusion – and so a good thing – or as ‘dumbing down’ – and so a bad thing – misses the point. Globalization, which is as Scott notes the driver behind expansion, presents the UK with two well documented and relevant problems. First, the workforce has to be keenly attuned to the new demands of changing productive practice, in some quarters described as ‘post-industrialization’ or the ‘knowledge economy.’ Secondly, education itself has found a new global market. These two challenges intersect and provide the context within which universities function and ‘grow’. The current political climate encourages education to be represented and treated as a private consumer good and as the public site for the production of skills thought exchangeable to advantage (public and private) in the global economy.⁶

For Scott, this new form of ‘mass’ education is more flexible in structure, breaks down traditional distinctions – such as that between core and widening participation student – and is less hierarchical. In this paper I shall be suggesting that Scott’s rather favourable account of ‘postmodern forms of knowledge production’ leads him to underestimate the effects of the market on the process and content of learning. The real problem with ‘mass’ higher education arises not from accommodating greater student numbers, nor in adapting to flexible provision but in the impact of commercialization. This same argument was made by Theodor Adorno about the commercialization of culture in the US around the second-world-war. Mass, or better ‘a commercialized’, system - of either culture or education – requires there to be a product to distribute. It requires standards of calculable uniformity and multiple copies of a product that can be distributed to numerous – already presupposed – consumers. The purpose of quality mechanisms, procedures and audits was never to ‘enhance the learning experience’ for more students but to introduce the uniformity