The public role of the university reconsidered

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Abstract

Today, higher education has become a commodity in the global education market aiming to serve the knowledge society through 'the production, transmission and dissemination of high-quality knowledge' (Simons, 2006, 33). One cannot dispute the economic importance of higher education, but to see the university as performing only this economic function is a misplaced and indefensible idea. In this article I shall argue that the university (its academics and graduates) has a role to play in cultivating democratic action and that this can most appropriately be done by reconsidering its civic role in relation to critical reasoning, social justice and deliberation with others.

On some of the limitations of the commodification of higher education

Over the past decade the university's public role has come under considerable scrutiny from all spheres of civil society. South Africa is no exception, especially considering the debates and discussions spearheaded by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) regarding the university's responsibility to be "publicly accountable" (Friedman & Edigheji, 2006) and to "re-insert the public good into higher education" (Singh, 2001). My own institution's mission is "to create and sustain, in commitment to the ideal of excellent scholarly and scientific practice, an environment within which knowledge can be discovered, can be shared, and can be applied to the benefit of the community" (http://www.sun.ac.za/university/StratPlan) – an illustration of the University's acknowledged public role. As in many other countries, in South Africa the higher education sector has also come under the spell of economics, expressed in the idea that the prime function of university education "is the training of a high-skilled workforce [graduates] and the production of high-quality scientific knowledge" (Biesta, 2007, 467). In this regard the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) emphasises the importance of equipping all graduates with the skills and qualities required for participation as citizens in a democratic society and as workers and professionals in the economy. This clearly illustrates that higher education has itself become a commodity in the global education market aiming to serve the knowledge society through "the production, transmission and dissemination of high-quality knowledge" (Simons, 2006, 33).

One cannot dispute the economic importance of higher education, but to see the university as performing only this economic function is a misplaced and indefensible idea. For instance

there is a long-standing epistemological tradition that the University should be a place devoted to enquiry and scholarship free from any utilitarian demands. Then there are those who engage in higher education for personal fulfilment and for the intrinsic rather than the exchange value of a university degree (Biesta, 2007, 468). The question that interests me in this short article, however, is not the economic, scientific or personal function of higher education, but the issue of its public (civic) role to enhance democratic action. In this article I shall argue that the university (its academics and graduates) has a role to play in cultivating democratic action and that this can most appropriately be done by reconsidering its civic role in relation to critical reasoning, social justice and deliberation with others. I now offer my three arguments in defence of the civic role that the university ought to enact.

Higher education and critical reasoning

Paulo Freire, who died a decade ago, enjoys almost iconic status among educators, especially radical educators, world-wide for providing a critical approach to education. Few of us would deny his legacy of practical and theoretical work (referred to by him as praxis) in critical literacy, which has impacted on the education for social justice agenda since the first appearance of his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1972 – one of the biggest selling books of all time by an educationist. In the 20th anniversary edition of this book Freire cogently establishes a link between democratic action and critical education: "But human activity consists of [democratic] action and reflection: it is praxis, it is transformation of the world" (Freire, 1993, 125). In other words, democratic action is predicated on education aimed at transforming the world. This implies that education ought to have a democratic and liberating purpose. By this Freire means that people (including graduates and academics) should not impose their views on others, but engage one another critically and show that their reading of the world is one of many possible readings (Freire, 1994) – that is to have a sense of critical reasoning. To practise critical reasoning is to recognise that there are multiple readings of the world with which people ought to engage carefully and critically. To have a single reading of the world is tantamount to advancing an education with answers as if ready-made and prepackaged truth claims are constantly available for different understandings of the world. One absolute and hegemonic (dominant) reading of the world often results in marginalising the voices of the oppressed (Freire, 2004). This 'pedagogy of hope' (of enabling the marginalised to develop their language or 'form of life') is in fact a move towards respecting cultural differences. Only then will liberation for all be forthcoming and critical reasoning be practised. Thus, for the university to enact its civic role, it ought to produce graduates who can engage in critical reasoning – who can reflect on and engage critically with multiple issues and not perform as technicists executing decisions they have acquired expertly at the university. In this way the Von Humboldtian idea of the university as a producer of 'enlightened citizens' not disconnected from wider social and political concerns would not necessarily be sacrificed (Simons, 2006, 38). The University that instils into its graduates a capacity for critical judgement and an appreciation of the good life from the vantage position of the many would prepare them for participation as informed citizens in democratic societies. If this happens, universities would become "important agents of the public sphere, initiating social change [for the many] rather than just [uncritically] responding to it" (Delanty, 2003, 81).

Higher education and social justice

Freire's unwavering commitment towards emancipatory political action led him to claim that suffering is unacceptable at all times and in all contexts: "Mass hunger, unemployment, side by side with opulence, are not the result of destiny. Nothing can justify the degradation of human

beings. Nothing …" (Freire, 1998, 93). Clearly Freire posits a view of education that cannot be divorced from social justice. He is not alone in articulating such a view of education. Iris Marion Young, one of the foremost political theorists in the modern era, renowned for her work on justice and difference, argues that social justice requires dismantling structures of oppression and domination which, according to her, manifest themselves in exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990). Applying this notion of social justice to higher education means that the University's graduates ought to pay attention to finding and dismantling social structures that sustain oppression. For instance eliminating acts of oppression and domination in societies such as sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and racism involves dismantling the social structures and processes in which these violent acts manifest themselves and do not merely increase the policing and security in neighbourhoods, on campuses and in schools (Eisenberg, 2006, 10).

Higher education has also to be charged with the task of equalising and expanding the opportunities for its graduates both in terms of the jobs they might have access to and therefore the material resources they can hope to enjoy, and in terms of their role as citizens and therefore in terms of their cultural status, inclusion and political power (Eisenberg, 2006, 13). Then university graduates ought to engender critical ways of doing which focus on a politics of difference (that is, acknowledging that people are not the same and that we should recognise our heterogeneity) and which can lead to the non-exploitation, non-oppression and exclusion of those who are vulnerable in our societies. For instance graduates who take up credible positions in the work place should begin to break down those social structures and processes which often exclude people from disadvantaged groups of securing particular jobs, or of making careers for themselves.

I want to come back to Freire's claim that the degradation of human beings cannot be justified and what universities can do potentially is to eliminate social injustices. Acquiring a university qualification does not simply mean that a person passively receives predigested information without actively engaging with such information. Someone can receive information but fail to engage actively with it or as Maxine Greene puts it, to reach out for meanings (1995, 57). In such a case, a person cannot be said to be ready for learning, because learning requires a person to construct meanings, to reach beyond where she is or to transcend the given (Greene, 1995, 111). When a person has gone beyond the given, constructed meanings and found their own voices, she has demonstrated a readiness to learn – she has acted justly. In other words, following Greene (1995, 34), people show a readiness to learn when they do not just look at themselves as passive receivers of information, but rather when they demonstrate a willingness 'to tell their stories, to pose their own questions, to be present – from their own perspectives – to the common [social] world'. When a person becomes concerned about going beyond the given, she invariably wants to respond to other and different challenges that she might encounter. For example, a person who learns about the suffering of others not only imagines what others experience, but also how he/she might find ways to alleviate the vulnerabilities of others – to respond to others' suffering. In this way acting justly involves wanting to look beyond the given and to search for meanings which would be responsive to the experiences of vulnerability of others. Here, I specifically think of many university graduates who claim to have learnt, yet do not even begin to wonder how their education could respond to – or as Greene says, awaken in them a 'wide-awakeness' – the fact that something must be done for those who remain tragically in need, who suffer deprivations such as family deterioration, neighbourhood decline, joblessness, illnesses like HIV&AIDS and addictions. Hence these graduates have not shown a readiness to learn – to act justly and to respond to some of the conditions of those who might suffer vulnerabilities.

Higher education and metrology

To further extend my argument about the civic role universities ought to play, I want to refer to a claim made by the Executive Mayor of Cape Town (in a conversation between higher education institutions in the Western Cape and the City at a recent colloquium) that the City would provide higher education with a laboratory to engage in research, specifically responding to some of the crises in service delivery such as removing storm-water during the winter months in Crossroads, providing adequate housing for the masses, remedying electricity load shedding, and attending to the undersupply of police personnel to combat escalating levels of crime. On another occasion at a Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) meeting the Senior Director of Education Planning in the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) expressed his concern about the mechanical mode in which some curriculum planners, advisers and teachers do their work and which is of major concern to the WCED. Both the mayor and education planner acknowledge that the university has a civic role to play through its research activities in order to contribute to processes of democratisation – that is, to widen the reach of the university. In this section I shall refer to the technological argument of Bruno Latour (the French anthropologist of science), who hints at a different way to articulate the civic role of the university.

For Latour, techno-scientists construct facts and machines in their laboratories which are then distributed to the world beyond the safe environment of the laboratory. These facts and machines can survive under non-laboratory conditions – they show up in places other than where they were originally constructed. In his words, "No one has ever seen a laboratory fact move outside unless the lab is first brought to bear on an 'outside' situation and that situation is transformed so that it fits laboratory prescriptions" (Latour, 1983, 166). Here, the outside world, like the high storm-water levels in Crossroads and the mechanistic curriculum planners, should be transformed into laboratories. This enterprise in which the outside world can be changed to a world inside of which facts and machines can survive, Latour calls 'metrology' – that is, a transformation of society, an incorporation of society into a network of techno-science so that facts and machines can travel without any visible effort (Biesta, 200, 477). In other words, facts and machines remain where they are, but only more locations and people are incorporated into the world of facts and machines. That is, the real-world problems are attracted to the research enterprises of the University. It is along these lines that the university and its graduates can make an important contribution to the democratisation of knowledge (Biesta, 2007, 478). In support of this view Norbert Ricken (2007, 496) posits that "the university is to be a *deliberate* university, *deliberate* in the sense of intentional, *deliberate* in the sense of conscious and fully considered, and *deliberate* in the sense of thinking carefully and in deliberation with others".

While I support the public role universities ought to perform in order to contribute towards the democratisation of our processes and structures, I remain cautious about over-extending this civic role argued for thus far. Universities should not abandon academic inquiry for its own sake and should not tolerate reducing scientific research always to being a mere instrument for something else – that is, to what civil society alone demands. This is so, because research always has an educative value whether ethical, aesthetic or political, which helps to shape the autonomy of the person doing research. It is this kind of personal autonomy that would enable people (graduates) to engage in autonomous activities of benefit to society. In this way the cultivation of pure academic inquiry would invariably have useful, applied and practical qualities. In other words this would mean that universities would still produce highly skilled professionals and researchers as a necessary workforce that can simultaneously attend to the demands of the public good.

Finally, I want to reconsider the public role of the university in relation to neoliberalism's corporate (market-driven) assault on the university in order to make the promise of substantive democracy a matter of urgency. The ascendancy of neoliberalism and corporate culture in every

aspect of civil society not only consolidates economic power in the hands of a few, it also aggressively subordinates the needs of society to the market. The reality of low-wage jobs and the erosion of social provisions for a growing number of people cause citizens to lose their public voice and be fashioned into compliant workers, depoliticised consumers and passive citizens (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004, 251-252). The good life in the corporate sphere is construed in terms of profitability and our identities as consumers – we are what we buy [and own]. This corporate culture has also challenged many universities to model themselves after big businesses and the signs are not encouraging. Knowledge with a high market value (for instance, science and engineering) is what counts, while those fields such as the fine arts and humanities that cannot be quantified in corporate terms will either be downsized or allowed to become irrelevant in the hierarchy of academic knowledge. What the corporate idea of the university fails to recognise is that

> the public mission of higher education implies that knowledge has a critical function; that intellectual inquiry that is unpopular or debunking should be safeguarded as an important social asset; and that faculty in higher education are more than merely functionaries of the corporate order (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004, 265).

Instead, as civil society, administrators, academics and students we should continue to embrace the university as a public space "where students can learn to think for themselves, question authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacity to make a difference in society" (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004, 276). This implies that universities should defend their educators as intellectuals who exercise their academic freedom to take positions on controversial issues, examine the role they play in lessening human suffering, and make connections to audiences outside the university or to the issues that confront them in everyday life. I conclude with the words of Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux (2004, 278):

> We believe that intellectuals who work in our nation's universities should present the conscience of this society because they not only shape the conditions under which future generations learn about themselves and their relations to others and the world, but also because they engage in pedagogical spaces that are by their very nature moral and political, rather than simply profit-maximising and technical. At its best, such pedagogy … provide[s] spaces that are both comforting and unsettling, spaces that both disturb and enlighten.

In my view such a university would indeed perform a civic role, because it creates opportunities for its students to take responsibility for their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a deep sense of respect for others, and learn how to think and engage critically in a democratic society.

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