

Embodied Learning?

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Although I have given this ETM the title of ‘embodied learning’, it might just as well be ‘what is happening to universities?’ or maybe ‘Stepford University’. I say this because the focus of this month’s thought is about the experience of university life and my concerns about the direction that higher education study is taking – and the possible consequences for future generations of students.

All these thoughts have been fuelled by recent developments in higher education provision and (possibly) exacerbated by it being the start of a new term and the general panic that appears to overwhelm senior management faced with the fear of falling student numbers in an ever increasing competitive ‘market’ (I’ll come back to market in a moment). At the same time, and by coincidence, I have recently completed a chapter for an edited collection on Embodiment in Higher Education (1). The general theme of which is to explore the notion of higher education as an embodied learning experience. In this specific case, I used examples of sport and physical activity as a way to explore how an embodied approach might offer the potential to look beyond the limits that are being established through current preoccupation with consumerist discourse. The intention was to provide a possible starting point to reveal such limits and develop ways to counter uncritical neo-liberal arguments about sport and sporting capital which are so often offered as positive and unproblematic especially in relation to the benefits of sport. However, I feel that this approach can equally be applied to higher education. Taking an embodied stance helps us to accommodate the more complex aspects of our everyday existence. Often this everyday existence is about negotiating and managing at an individual level as well as a social level the different experiences that are both positive and not so positive. In sport, the central foundation for neoliberal arguments is generally based upon the relationship between the benefits of sport and the economy, much like the claims made about the benefits of university education in terms of economic success for the individual. This focus often overlooks (or consciously ignores) the embodied experience of the individual (such as the potential pleasures of sport or learning) in its attempt to explore broader economic and political agendas. An embodied approach allows for consideration of the influence of these (and other) forms of knowledge structure but more in line with the effect they have upon the individual experience or, in other words, the broader everyday reality of embodied existence.

Bearing in mind the above, I have outlined a few of the thoughts that arose when I attempted to relate embodied thinking to HE.

The problem of a rhetoric of students as customers

The rhetoric of the student as a paying customer or client is not necessarily new. For instance, Graham (1995) noted how the business model of 'consumer choice' was being applied to American schools in the latter stages of the 20th Century (2). This approach introduced a more noticeable effort to apply 'listening' to student voices in the context of them being customers. The shift to thinking about a student in terms of a 'happy' customer created uneasy tensions with existing philosophies within education and healthcare where the decisions practitioners were making were ultimately 'for the good' of their students or patients, rather than to increase profit. Consequently, a consumerist approach has created a situation which suggests that participation in HE is akin to visiting a shop or hotel – and an expectation of a service that can be assessed in the same way that we can rank a hotel experience on Tripadvisor. However, while the experience we expect to get for our money on our holiday can be more readily assessed in terms of quality of, say, hotel staff, cleanliness, service, accommodation etc – it is much more difficult to transfer this approach to what we might expect to receive from a learning experience. Ok – so students might rightfully expect to receive service in terms of more tangible commodities, such as the state of the university buildings and the facilities on offer, but this is only one aspect of the learning experience.

The constant reiteration of the student as a customer is creating a form of knowledge that is uncritically condoning a specific orientation to HE learning. One that is ultimately contributing to a culture of measurement and impact that has so greatly affected contemporary secondary and primary schooling. In doing so, it has generated greater layers of bureaucracy as senior managers and administrators seek to provide evidence of 'learning and 'quality' – as a means for, hopefully, justifying tuition fees. Such focus has seriously undermined the essence of what it is to learn and experience learning in its broadest sense.

The learning experience

A University learning experience should be something that 'ignites' the student 'within'. One where learning is scary, risky, creative, challenging and rewarding. So, while it is only right that it should be a safe environment (in terms of injury) it should also be somewhere that is a step out of one's comfort zone, a place to challenge existing thoughts and fire up an embodied consciousness. This should extend beyond the lecture theatre as a university experience is about the 'whole package' and being able to step outside the security blanket of the school and family home. However, while my interpretation of a whole package is based on the notion of a broad embodied experience (that incorporates social interaction as a continuous form of self-discovery), it could be argued that as universities attempt to make their campuses even more marketable the result is more akin to providing an overall 'consumer experience' (almost like an all-inclusive hotel complex). My fear is that we are,

ultimately, doing students (and future society) a disservice by not providing broader and more creative learning experiences.

Independent learning?

Like many of the arguments that support the notion of free play for children where risk is an essential part of the experience (3), students are being stifled by over-protective parents and staff. This appears to emulate current approaches in schools and family life. While the levels of supervision and direction can be seen to have been generated through concerns for the wellbeing of young people, there is, nevertheless, the risk that we are creating a generation of Stepford students. As I mentioned above, the learning process should be scary at times. It should challenge and offer opportunities to step outside comfort zones. In doing so, provide experiences for students to reflect upon, consider and make decisions – not only in the classroom, but in everyday life.

However, HE is not just about the students it is about the staff as well. It could be argued that creativity is being stifled by constant focus on marketing, selling and attempting to measure quality (in ways that reflect current league table prerequisites) which, in turn, distract staff from having time to develop and incorporate creative approaches in their teaching.

As a final thought, it might be the case that my concerns have been exacerbated by the time of the year and my recent deliberation about HE experience. It might equally be the case that while my concerns about the direction of HE are relevant, it may be that students and staff are (hopefully) still able to benefit from an embodied university experience despite the prevailing discourses (by choosing to avoid them as best as they can).

Notes

1. The chapter I refer to is *Researching embodied sport and movement cultures: theoretical and methodological considerations* (In: Leigh, J. *Conversations on Embodiment*, London: Routledge) which will be published in 2018
2. Graham, G. (1995) '*Physical education through students' eyes and in students' voices: Implications for teachers and researchers*', *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 14 (4), 478–82.
3. There is a lot of material that explores the way 'risk' is understood and managed within contemporary society. Frank Furedi provides an interesting overview in his book, *Culture of Fear* (2002), while there are many studies exploring how society views childhood and the

role of play in relation to creativity and overall learning (for instance: Chris Jenks, 2005, *Childhood*; Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell, 2008, *Play for a Change*; Shirley Wyver and Peter Whiteman, 2012, *Children and Childhood 2*)