

Deirdre McArdle-Clinton

The Consumer Experience of Higher Education

The Rise of Capsule Education



C O N T I N U U M S T U D I E S I N E D U C A T I O N

The Consumer Experience of Higher Education

The Rise of Capsule Education

DEIRDRE McARDLE-CLINTON



Continuum International Publishing Group

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London
SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704
New York
NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

© Deirdre McArdle-Clinton 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Deirdre McArdle-Clinton has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-18470-6209-3 (hardcover)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Publisher has applied for CIP data

Typeset by Aptara

Printed in the United Kingdom by Biddles, Norfolk

The Consumer Experience of Higher Education

The Rise of Capsule Education

Also available from Continuum

Rethinking Universities

Philosophies of Research into Higher Education

Pedagogy and the University

Internationalizing the University

Sally Baker and B. J. Brown

Brian J. Brown and Sally Baker

Monica McLean

Yvonne Turner and Sue Robson

For Pat

Preface

This study challenges the nature of Education at its very fundamentals. In particular, it explores the experience of schooling – albeit at third level – and concludes that there is much that is disabling and oppressive in this experience for all involved. It also shows how unproductive, if not even counterproductive, much of the experience is at both a personal and social level.

Schooling evolved historically out of the recognition that there were societal requirements for knowledge and expertise which could not be met by other systems such as the family and community. The beginnings of universal primary education in the first half of the nineteenth century in England and Ireland reflected the requirements of an industrial society for mass literacy. In addition, schooling introduced or further developed other key disciplines necessary for the effective functioning of an industrial society. These included punctuality, following instructions and an appreciation of the concepts of specialisms and standards.

Today, we expect different things of schooling. A child entering primary school this year is likely to remain in full-time education until the year 2022. If education is about envisaging and preparing for the future, we know little enough about the world these children will emerge into. How should the education system respond to such an uncertain context? Dealing with the challenges of the present is difficult enough. Anticipating and planning for future ones is even more daunting. It is self-evident that if we do not know what the future holds, the education project should be one of preparing children to respond to the unknown. This is a profound challenge to the education system, accustomed as it is to operating from a position of superior knowledge and certitude.

However, what we can be sure about is that the education system must now move from a focus for preparing children for a life of work to one which is concerned with preparing them for a life of learning. This changed focus transforms the purpose of early life education.

As the focus of education shifts from one of lifelong work to one of lifelong learning, each of the education sectors must move somewhat for a focus on what is learned to one which is more concerned with the learner's capability for learning, disposition and motivation for learning and readiness to move to the next learning stage.

The psychologist, Howard Gardner, talks about the five minds of the future. These are the disciplined mind, i.e. subject mastery; the synthesising mind, i.e. the capacity to abstract and organize information; the creative mind, i.e. the capacity to see new solutions; the respectful mind, i.e. the capacity to work with difference, and finally the ethical mind, i.e. the motive towards goodness.

The Irish Experience

The foundational importance of the pre-school years for readiness to learn through life, though well established in the literature is only slowly being realized in the institutional provision of pre-school education in Ireland. This is despite the emergence of the overwhelming body of research showing the pivotal significance of effective early intervention in the educational development of the pre-school child, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

At primary level, curriculum changes introduced incrementally over recent decades, and enabled by the abolition of the Primary Certificate in the late 1960s, has allowed for the development of a child-centred curriculum which appears to be highly effective in engaging the children in multifaceted ways in their own learning. The sector however is not without strain. While pupil-teacher ratios have consistently improved over the years, many of the additional staff have been deployed in much needed, but specialist, one to one services. Class sizes, therefore, have remained worryingly high. There is a strong educational case for tackling this issue. Furthermore,

there is some anecdotal evidence that as post-primary looms from fourth class onwards, the focus of the primary syllabus begins to shift to the more traditional 3Rs where concern for the child's ability to handle the predominantly cognitive agenda of second level begins to take precedence.

Second level education in Ireland has functioned within a clearly defined policy framework, i.e. a transparent points system which rewards students on the basis of performance in the Leaving Certificate. The sector operates, therefore, within clearly defined parameters where the purpose is clear and unambiguous – to maximise points gained. Career choice, mediated through the third level applications system, is determined by achievements here and, theoretically at any rate, the student's life course is now laid down.

At a time of rapid changes where old certainties no longer hold true, assumptions such as these are poorly grounded. In a context where insecurity is the norm, such long-term determinism can strait-jacket students and limit their ability to adapt and respond to new situations and unanticipated threats and to find new solutions to problems we cannot yet even envisage. For such situations attributes of creativity, imagination and lateral capabilities are the essential attributes.

The challenge which this presents to second level education arises from the fact that this sector has traditionally been seen as the end of education. Compulsory education ends at 16 years. The terminal examination at the end of post-primary is referred as the 'Leaving' certificate. The characteristic urgency of second level then arises from a historical commitment to make sure that the students get everything needed to sustain them for the rest of their working lives.

This of course, patently no longer applies. More than 60 per cent of the cohorts now go on to post-school education and this figure continues to rise. Many more will return to education on and off throughout their lives. There is now no reason why their futures should be pre-destined by achievements at second level. For this reason, addressing their current developmental needs is likely to be the best way of preparing them for their future lives.

This book shows that at third level, the Education project is fragmented, reductionist and instrumental. It draws attention to the barriers and constraints to providing and developing a third level experience that is liberating, energising and enriching. In short, it challenges all involved in Education, at whatever level, to revisit the experience from a perspective of critical, emancipatory learning and to move the project on in radically new ways.

Professor Tom Collins,
National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
Part 1	1
Introduction	3
1. Modernism, Postmodernism and Higher Education	7
2. The Packaging of Education – Education as Oppression	29
3. Education Systems – Education as an Industry	43
4. Naming the Industry's Products – Education Terminologies	51
5. Postmodern Consumer Culture – The Effect on Education	69
6. Measuring the Grade and Quality of Education	89
7. Education – Agent for Social Placement	106
8. From Masfield to Massification	118
Part 2	133
9. Higher Education as a Consumer Experience	135
10. The Testimony of Teachers	150
11. The Testimony of Students	179

Part 3	193
12. Reflections	195
13. An Alternative View	206
14. Exploring the Metaphor	217
15. A Compromise Proposal	225
<i>References</i>	234
<i>Author Index</i>	253
<i>Subject Index</i>	258

Part 1

Introduction

All the best stories start with the words: 'Once upon a time ...' So it is with this story too. Once upon a time – five years ago, to be exact – the author had a supermarket experience which presented a startling eureka moment. She observed that food items were being presented for sale in capsule form. For example, a small tray contained several tiny, evenly sized potatoes complete with a knob of butter and a scattering of chives, covered with cling film and ready to be inserted into a microwave oven. Rather nonplussed, the author mused whether anyone prepared meals in the traditional fashion any more and whether purchasers of prepared foods would be able to recognise the originals. Immediately, and shockingly, came the realization that this was the same process which was being followed in the academic field. Formed by the kinds of life and educational experience which they have undergone, students bring a new perspective to education. They exhibit an increasing reluctance to purchase or consult texts and because of their 'shopping' approach, many lecturers prepare notes for easy academic consumption and tend to examine these notes rather than examine a subject. The input of students is decreasing on a continuing basis and they are becoming increasingly disengaged from their studies. This realization was the beginning of a journey from potatoes to postmodernism.

This book deals with the philosophy underpinning current educational provisions. Anecdotal information would suggest that students, their perception shaped by the educational experience they have undergone, view education as a *consumer experience* and require that information be packaged for easy consumption. This book provides support for this perception and examines the current situation in education against the backdrop of an emerging trend

that sees education as a product and students as consumers or customers.

The subtitle of this book is *the Rise of Capsule Education*. The word 'capsule' is derived from the Latin diminutive, 'capsula' from 'capsa', a box, and 'capere' meaning *to hold*. Dictionary explanations involve the concepts of small size, abridged form and separateness. A capsule is often understood as a tiny packet which, because of its membrane, an individual may absorb without the distress or effort of chewing or tasting. The contents are sealed; there is, therefore, no sense of touch or involvement. What is significant about a capsule is that someone else shapes and probably prescribes it. The recipient need only swallow the capsule whole. It is clear that consumers are, more and more, purchasing 'capsule' products, that is, items such as food, holidays and decor, where the product is shaped by the provider and the input of the consumer – if it exists at all – is very limited. To the dismay of educators, students are adopting a similar approach to education.

Traditionally, higher education was the preserve of the elite and there was a strong link between qualification and education. That is, the signifier represented the signified. The growth in democratisation during the middle of the last century exposed the inequities in the education system and made a claim for the provision of higher education for all. The link between higher education and high status, high paying careers is a seductive one. Bound together with those who *want* such an outcome are those members of society who feel that they *ought* to want it. These two groups provide the population willing to undergo the higher education treatment. Such mass provision places a considerable strain on funding. The outcome of this constraint is that educational institutions should operate on a business footing in the belief that such a model can deliver maximum efficiency. Applying the business paradigm ushers in a new framework as the education field becomes a market with its outputs measured against external criteria. The budget becomes the overarching tool of management in a constrained resource environment. Funding is driven by enrolment and issues of quality acquire new interpretations such as organization size and numbers qualified. Education becomes an industry with students as customers/consumers and staff as processing units. As education shifts from elite to mass, there occurs a rupture

between the signifier and the signified with a qualification no longer representing either education or competency.

In this education field the aims of students and administrators coalesce but are opposite to the views of lecturers. The goals of many students, to obtain a qualification with the least possible effort, commitment and input, are in line with the goals of administrators who need to have as many qualified 'outputs' as possible in order to garner maximum funding. Lecturers, the traditional gatekeepers of quality, see the concept in terms of learning on the part of students and are dismayed to see that their understanding of quality no longer provides foundations for practice in education. They recognise that many students are reluctant to purchase or read texts and they acknowledge that their own response is to supply students with sets of notes. There is an understanding and expectation on the part of students that there will be no surprises in examinations. This chasm between the lecturers' ideal and the students' approach may cause the kind of disenchantment first noted by Marx, as lecturers now need to produce an alien, petrified product – *education as a consumer experience*. Additionally, semesterisation seems to have the effect of increasing the pressure to deliver an examinable module in a time span of 12 or 13 weeks. There appears to be a relentless drive towards the 'encapsulation' of education and towards the perception of education as a market commodity.

The difficulty for lecturers is that there is a gap between what they want to give, in terms of education, and what students wish to receive. It is possible that this may be because students may be attuned to the *postmodern* whereas lecturers may be firmly rooted in *modernism*. The postmodern approach is one based on consumption where there is attachment to the fleeting and the ephemeral, where image is more important than reality. Postmodernism and its perspectives and terms have infiltrated society over the past number of decades. The most striking aspect of this perspective is its overturning of modernism which has traditionally provided the underpinnings for our institutions and our thinking. Modernism offers clear meaning and defined terms. Postmodernism, on the other hand, plays with indeterminacy of language and refuses to fix meaning. One of the most significant revelations of postmodernism is the concept of the *simulacrum*. This