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The Cultural Politics of Research of in New Zealand Polytechnics.

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Biodata

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Abstract

Legislative and societal changes have transformed New Zealand polytechnics almost beyond recognition over the last ten years. These changes have meant that many polytechnic staff are now required to research if they are to teach on programmes at and above the graduate level. A comprehensive institutional research record is also necessary for polytechnics seeking university status.

This presentation seeks to problematise the notion of research as it is currently constituted in New Zealand tertiary institutions, with special reference to New Zealand polytechnics. It analyses the publicly held and documented notions of research and knowledge, questioning how relevant these are in light of contemporary philosophical debates over the status of knowledge and by association, research. Specifically, it seeks to explore the following problems:

1. What is research and how might the current narratives of research in education be interrogated?

2. What societal, legislative and associated discoursal changes have led to the large New Zealand polytechnics reconstituting themselves in the way that they have, particularly in regards to research? Whose interests do the changes serve?
Historical Background

New Zealand polytechnics and institutes of technology are a relatively recent phenomenon compared with the development of similar educational institutions in Australia and Great Britain. The first institutes of technology were established in New Zealand in 1960, with a number of provincial and suburban institutes being established throughout the seventies and eighties. They offered a rather late addition to a tertiary sector monopolised until that time by the University of New Zealand. Butterworth and Tarling write:

The distribution of education expenditure differed in the various countries, as did the disposition of research and development monies. Both tended to reflect particular historical-cultural inheritances. The extent of innovation in the post-school sector was arguably greatest in the United States. It was arguably least in New Zealand, where neither Australian-model colleges of advanced education nor English-model degree-granting polytechnics eventuated (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994: 61).

The role of the polytechnics in tertiary education has evolved since the sixties from one of providing narrowly focussed technical training to offering degrees (from 1990), to the pursuit of university status (in the case of some of the largest institutes, notably Auckland Institute of Technology and Unitec) in the late nineties.

While a clear delineation of activity was temporarily arrived at in the
late fifties, with the University of New Zealand claiming the education
of technologists as its territory and leaving the training of
technicians to the technical schools (Trenwith, 1995: 18-19), this was
to be continually questioned as the demand for tertiary education
expanded from the late fifties onwards. As a relatively small colonial
institution the University of New Zealand had largely succeeded in
being all things to all people. However its breadth of coverage and
inclusive policies meant that it lacked a definition of purpose more
obvious in the educational institutions of countries which had a more
differentiated tertiary sector (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994).

Concomitantly, New Zealand polytechnics rapidly superseded their
original raison d'etre and their provision expanded with the amendment
of the 1964 Education Amendment Act in 1974. This '...made continuing
education the new emphasis and placed an accent on open access and
community-based education (Funnell, Rosonowski and Williams, 1997)'.
The polytechnics became an obvious location for training programmes of
the unemployed, Maori and women. The seventies also saw the
polytechnics able to compete for the training of new, and increasingly
professionalised employment sectors. Examples include the introduction
of nursing and other medical courses, as well as accounting. As
provision diversified, polytechnic staff were often characterised as
being somewhat pushy and entrepreneurial, overkeen to find new niches
for themselves in an expanding educational sector (Funnell, Rosonowski
and Williams, 1997). Indeed, by the late eighties the polytechnics
offered a wide range of courses, including '...a nucleus of programs
through which claims for higher status credentials (could) be justified (Funnell, Rosonowski and Williams, 1997). Certainly, some of the professional training 'carve-ups' seemed very arbitrary. John Hinchcliff (President of AIT) points out just one anomaly, Physiotherapy came to AIT while Optometry went to the University of Auckland. If Physiotherapy had gone to the university, it would have enjoyed degree status, and if Optometry had come here it would have been a diploma. I knew that we had to get degrees through otherwise vocational education would never be respected, always seen as a poor distant cousin of academic education (Trenwith, 1995: 33).

The Education Amendment Act of 1990, finally enabled institutions other than universities to confer degrees (Butterworth and Tarling). The Act came after considerable wrangling between the universities and the government, with the Universities of Auckland and Canterbury threatening to take the then Labour Government to court over their unwillingness to consult with the academic community in light of the contentious recommendations of the Hawke Report (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994). The outcome of the 1990 Act seemed at the time to be a compromise between government and the universities. Universities retained the right to moderate and write their own degrees and consult separately with the government through the Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (although the University Grants Committee, previously considered a useful buffer between the universities and government, was dismantled); research funding remained tagged to teaching rather than being separated and made contestable, and academic freedom seemed to be more or less in tact (despite the new requirement for charters and Councils.)
with government representatives).

Negatives for the universities were that the Act reduced per student funding, resulting in a considerable increase in fees, it instituted the loans scheme and narrowly targeted subsistance student allowances to the 'very poor'. Importantly, it represented a major step in homogenising and deinstitutionalising the tertiary sector (the New Zealand Qualifications Authority being one of the major tools in the exercise).

The Act was important to the polytechnics as it gave them the freedom to forge their own future through relative institutional autonomy (rather than being tied to the old Department of Education). However, the freedom which they applauded at the time provided the platform for the probable implementation of the worst excesses of the Hawke Report, nearly a decade later and outlined this year in the New Zealand Government Green Paper: A Future Tertiary Education Policy for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1997).

Butterworth and Tarling were aware that 1990 was a 'breather' only and not in any way a retreat by the market liberals. The year brought a new National Government and an intensification of 'rule by Treasury'. As Butterworth and Tarling (1994) state, they fiercely disbelieved a government could or should legislate for a narrow ideology designed to produce a totally commodified world (or, in this case, New Zealand): It has been easy for the public to believe that the main object of changes since 1984 has been to save money. The 'reforms' have been
often advanced under that guise. It is, however, a mistaken view. The object is ideological. The millenarian vision of the ideologues involves an unremitting attack on the structures of democratic pluralism. Their central project is the negation of community values and the redefinition of the citizen as merely consumer. The aim involves the destruction of that sense of communal responsibility which infused the creation of the modern democratic state, but which Hayek traduced as an inconvenient hangover from tribal consciousness (Tarling and Butterworth, 1994: 250-251).

Also, as one Australian commentator has observed, saving money has meant different things to different people at different times. It does not have to be achieved through unbridled laissez-faire (and indeed often is not):

...less than ten years ago (we had) a policy model based on the view that the most effective use of public resources would be achieved through a coordinated, systemic approach (Phillips, 1997: 12).

Recent Developments

In the late nineties New Zealand polytechnics, along with the universities themselves, seem to have fully embraced the market model. In many ways this has been in the interests of survival (in the face of decreasing government funding and increased student participation) and, arguably, because academic leaders were seduced by the glamour of corporatisation. Others may simply not have been imaginative or brave enough to think outside the ‘commodify everything’ mould. In any case we have now reached a point where concern for real educational goals
appears naive and takes secondary place to the business and economics of education.

In Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (in the 1980's) the idea of education was enthusiastically reconstructed. The idea of education as a social good, which included education's social engineering, as the transmission belt of values and as potent engine of the consensus seeking state, had prevailed through a century and more of public provision. The idea was now retired. The state would continue and even increase its expenditure on education, but as a matter of economic advantage. The focus shifted from the social good of the citizen as participant in the common weal and fixed on the individualised consumer of an investment good (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994: 63).

Performativity and competition inherent in the market model have meant that the New Zealand polytechnics have had to transform themselves and support their degree conferring power with a solid and reputable research record. Moreover, the influx of international students as well as competition with other New Zealand tertiary institutions for students in the domestic market means that in order to compete on a 'level playing field' the large polytechnics are seeking the more prestigious status of university. While the notion of university has been reconstructed many times and treads the continuum between Cardinal Newman's liberal and inclusive institution to the German research university emphasising a scientific model of knowledge, in New Zealand in the late nineties we have the construction of universities for competitive advantage. There is a considerable degree of substance in
the polytechnics' argument that they have grown in function and form to warrant this redesignation. Nevertheless, the underlying point is that but for competition for power and funds (and students) there would probably be no quest for university status.

The path that the New Zealand polytechnics have travelled raises some interesting questions and in many ways explicates the track that tertiary education as a whole has taken. Some poststructuralist insights may help to uncover this. Some poststructuralist insights into research and education in our times.

Jean Francois Lyotard's seminal work The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge written in 1979 and translated into English in 1984, uncannily and prophetically illuminates the whole area of knowledge, techno-science and research and the relationship to capital in western society in the nineties. It provides a way to begin to look behind the myths of research as well as unravel the course that government and tertiary institutions have taken.

Lyotard writes in his introduction, of ‘...this very post-modern moment that finds the University nearing what may be its end, while the Institute may just be beginning (Lyotard, 1984: xxv)’. The comment refers to the increasing 'integration' (Touraine, 1974) of universities into the capitalist system, and their inexorable transformation into institutions of vocational (in the narrow sense of the word) education.
and applied research as the grand rationalist myths of the Enlightenment disintegrate. There is an appealing irony in the fact that the large polytechnics (in New Zealand) are currently trying hard to prove that they are worthy of university status, where they might more successfully try pointing out that the universities are increasingly like them.

Lyotard sees knowledge, and therefore research (as one side of the knowledge coin), as increasingly being treated as other (more traditional) commodities, to be bought and sold. He writes: The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume - that is, the form of value (Lyotard, 1984: 4).

He also suggests that only research results that can be quantified and compartmentalised (that is able to be computerised, translatable into a computer language) will be 'viable' in the future (Lyotard, 1984: 4). These predictions link in well with current calls to fund only applied (or, more fashionably, relevant/useful) research (McDonald, 1997) and to deliver tertiary education mostly on-line.

Drawing on the work of linguist, J. L. Austin (1962), Lyotard argues convincingly that 'performativity' stands as the new underlying raison d'etre for society in 'developed countries', replacing rationalism: The true goal of the system, the reason it programmes itself like a
computer, is the optimisation of the global relationship between input and output - in other words, performativity (Lyotard, 1984:11).

Nowhere is the transformation from rationalism to performativity more evident and traceable than in tertiary education.

Importantly, Lyotard (1984) notes how research organisations (be they universities or research centres) must mimic the capitalist corporate model in order to be seen to endorse the underlying rationale of performativity which their uncovering of 'new' knowledge underpins for capital. Only in being able to do this will they attract the funds to do the research necessary for their survival (in terms of money and raison d'être), both from government and from industry. The more integrated the institution, the more applied the research, the greater the financial returns and the greater the power accruing to the decision-makers and leaders of the institutions. Lyotard's (1984) observation of the relationship between business and applied science laboratories relates also to the institution which favours applied research:

The prevailing corporate norms of work management spread to the applied science laboratories: hierarchy, centralised decision-making, teamwork, calculation of individual and collective returns, the development of saleable programs, market research and so on (Lyotard, 1984: 45-46).

The organisational alignment of education with industry ensures a growing conformity of goals while encouraging different relationship between academic staff. Traditionally 'liberal' academic staff no longer serve the dominant educational narratives of 'equality of
opportunity' and 'the creation of a better society' because in the increasingly international and accounting-driven world of tertiary education they are simply not credible. Instead, they find themselves in a position of supporting a large corporation where the imperatives are altogether different from what they believed education to be about. Their underlying motivation becomes competition in support of increased personal and institutional performance (defined narrowly in terms of 'outputs') instead of cooperation for the benefit of their students and education, more generally.

The posthumous publication of Bill Readings' (1996) book entitled The University in Ruins offers a novel slant on Lyotard's theory of performativity as well as some useful possibilities for research in the future. Readings (1996) argues that the University as conceived by Humboldt, with the demise of the nation state (in the face of transnational capital and information flows) and, concomitantly, reason (there is no country or dominant culture to defend any longer) is now posthistorical. It has lived past its 'use by' date. He suggests that the corporatist tertiary institution is now driven only by the nonreferential (empty), accounting-driven notion of excellence where the idea is to do as much as possible (performativity), as well as possible, without really paying too much attention to what it is that is being done. As he says:

Its very lack of reference allows excellence to function as a principle of translatability between radically different idioms: parking services and research grants can each be equally excellent, and their excellence
is not dependent on any specific qualities or effects that they share (Readings, 1996: 24).

With the drive for excellence, administration in the university has taken on greater significance than research, teaching and learning:

'...a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research, so that teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration (Readings, 1996: 125)'. The tertiary educational corporation needs to, above all, be managed, in order to satisfy consumer demand, be nationally and internationally competitive, to operate 'within budget' and survive. Readings refers to this as the 'reign of the administrator (Readings, 1996)' and states that his aim in writing the book is to find a way out of the current ideological and discursive impasse. He says, 'I want to argue that accountants are not the only people capable of understanding the horizon of contemporary society, nor even the most adept at the task (Readings, 1996:18)'.

Readings (1996) contends that in a world where the grand narratives are no longer tenable, a breakdown of disciplinary structure is inevitable and desirable. This, he believes (although I think he is being hopeful) will release funds, through streamlining within the faculties, which should be ploughed into pedagogical initiatives (he is referring here to teaching and research). This 'opening up' or availability of 'extra space' could be considered as a temporality that must resist
commodification. A space for thought (something quite different from production for production's sake) would replace 'doing things'.

Thought for Readings refers to something that poses questions, rather than rushing to provide answers (endemic in an output driven society). He acknowledges that thought is as empty and non-referential as excellence but sees the emptiness of thought eminently preferable. He writes:

...Thought, unlike excellence, does not masquerade as an idea. In place of the simulacrum of an idea is the acknowledged emptiness of the name - a self-conscious exposure of the emptiness of Thought that replaces vulgarity with honesty....proceeding from this is that Thought does not function as an answer but as a question (Readings, 1996: 160).

In addition, Readings believes that thought names a differend. A different prospect altogether from the normalising call of excellence. Thought therefore avoids the terror Lyotard warns of in Habermas's community of consensus (Lyotard, 1984: xxv).

Readings (1996) parting call is for academics, existing in the ruins of what was once a university, (and I believe this can apply to those in institutions seeking the now empty status of university) to apply an ethos of justice and obligation to their teaching and research (and administration?). They should resist the notion that 'every man (sic) is an island', that autonomy, freedom of choice (consumer choice?) and general individualism reign supreme. In Readings' own words:

My aim then is an anti-modernist rephrasing of teaching and learning (and again we can read research as the flip side of the same
'knowledge' coin) as sites of obligation, as loci of ethical practices, rather than as means for the transmission of scientific knowledge. Teaching (and research) thus becomes answerable to the question of justice rather than to the criteria of truth (Readings, 1996: 154).

In line with Reading's (1996) contentions that education has been coopted (or has coopted itself?) as an arm of transnationally exchanged capital, The new work order: behind the language of fast capitalism (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996) scrutinises the fast capitalism/educational nexus through an analysis and explication of the myths embedded in fast capitalist texts. The authors' special interest is the way in which the language and core ideals of critical, social and literacy theory have been co-opted to put in place new types of workplace organisation. New workplace configurations, based around self-governing teams and flattened management structures ape organisational democracy in very seductive ways. As Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) show, however, the beneficiary is still capital, and labour is manipulated in more sophisticated ways than perhaps ever before.

This approach relates to the question of research in our times by showing the educational co-option for what it is, and the effect this has on those outside the fast capital elite; both in the so-called 'first world countries' and in the countries capital is increasingly uninterested in. The latter are countries beyond exploitation, the 'fourth world countries'. The book leads us on a quest to discover (and rediscover) knowledge and indeed life outside the grip of capital and,
by association, 'objective science'. The authors contend that by
recognising and analysing the discourse of fast capitalism, they and
others can more easily juxtapose it ‘...with other, competing,
overlapping, and mutually adjusting discourses, such as a critical
version of sociocultural literacy ... the various discourses of school
reform, and a variety of other community-based and public sphere
discourses (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996: 165)’. They would like to
see a new discourse opposed in part to the new capitalism, one which
begins to sound similar to Bill Readings’ call for obligation.
This new Discourse would disavow the consumer determinism of the new
capitalism. It would argue for the reinvigoration of the local as
against the 'faux' local of the new capitalism. It would see critique
as necessary to real learning and thus part and parcel of critical
thinking and the empowerment of workers. Most importantly, it would
e envision a new 'global citizenship' in terms of which we can all begin
to care about the members of the cooperative in Nicaragua and about the
poor in our own communities - as being linked to each other and
ourselves - if only to avoid degradation of all our spaces and lives
(Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:165-166).
Research in Polytechnics

The New Zealand polytechnics provide an interesting and timely site of
investigation for the way in which the push for research in tertiary
institutions serves fast capitalist goals and mimics the inculcation of
'the new discourse' in traditional production environments. The
requirement for tutorial/lecturing staff in polytechnics to be
researchers has been and still is a shock to many. It is one of the most significant and yet under-documented changes in the tertiary sector.

The conflicts and cynicism that the relatively abrupt change is causing can be usefully analysed in terms similar to those uncovered and identified by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996). For example, in considering the way students are taught in law school the authors observe that ‘The Discourse of law school creates kinds of people who (overtly or tacitly) define themselves as different from-often better than-other kinds of people (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996: 11)’. The same could be said of the current discourse of research. Research is a highly valued skill, commodity, and activity in tertiary education and its discourse serves to exclude those who do not, will not or currently cannot practice it e.g often lecturers in non-academic (or so-called practical) fields. But as Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) explain, the exclusion is more complicated than just that some people do not feel confident in engaging in research. It confronts the very person that they believe themselves to be.

The conflict, then, is not just that I am uncomfortable engaging in a new practice - much as a new activity might involve using new muscles. Rather the conflict is between who I am summoned to be in this new Discourse ...and who I am in other Discourses that overtly conflict with - and sometimes have historically contested with - this new Discourse (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996: 12).

This is certainly true of many polytechnic lecturers who see themselves
as quite different from university academic staff. In order to overcome
the cultural divide, polytechnic infrastructure is changing so as to
thoroughly inculcate the research ethos in academic staff i.e. to bring
about "...the social (and historical) construction of 'kinds' of
people" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996: 16). Moreover, threats of loss
of status, barriers to future promotion, and 'even, job loss are
implicit for those who refuse to or cannot re-construct themselves.
The organisational redesign required to re-construct the individual
begins to reflect the re-organisation of industrial workplaces through
the development of increasingly distributed systems (Gee, Hull and
Lankshear, 1996: 58). Examples are: the network staff development
system (as an example of a non-hierarchical and more 'intensive'
method of communication); the explicit development of a 'research
culture', an effective method to bring recalcitrants into the fold
non-threateningly, and almost imperceptibly; collaborative research
projects which act in much the same way; and the appointment of
research co-coordinators (not unlike team leaders in industry) whose
job it is to monitor and record research outputs while urging and
encouraging (but not ordering) academic staff to produce more and better
quality 'outputs'.

Anyone who researches knows that it is rarely a nine-to-five activity.
The large amount of information gathering required to inform any kind
of project usually means that the 'work of research' inevitably spills
over into the 'lifeworld' (Habermas, 1984, in Gee, Hull and
Lankshear, 1996: 34). This is particularly true in institutions making
the transition to a research culture, as many staff who believe they
ought to research (to inform their teaching, for interest, for
promotion or simply to retain their job) are not given an adequate time
allowance to do so. Inevitably, large amounts of private time, once
given to the home and family (or simply other interests) become
research and, therefore, work time. And so, with the omnipresent
research register, publicly available research outputs and the
requirement to produce as much as possible, academic staff along with
other workers in the new capitalism, are "...constantly on view and the
line between work and play, the line between public and private becomes
fuzzy..." (Boyett and Conn 1992: 40 in Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:
33). For those in the polytechnics, this a fundamental shift from
working in a predominantly teaching institution where what you teach
and how well you teach is largely known only to the teacher and
students. Cave, Hanney and Kogan (1991) observe that:
By contrast with the assessment of teaching, the evaluation of
performance in research is widely seen as providing a more acceptable
focus for the use of PI's (performance indicators) (Cave, Hanney, and

With moves afoot to link research databases to human resource databases
in large institutions, the research register begins to look like
tertiary education's Foucauldian panopticon

Interestingly, while the introduction of research into polytechnics has
met with resistance from teaching staff, the complaints tend to centre
around issues of resourcing (time and money to do research) rather than
to question whether research should be done at all. This underpins Gee,
Hull and Lankshear’s (1996) contention that the new capitalism encourages and can absorb criticisms which will fine-tune the system, make it perform better; but it disallows a questioning of the system per se.

Choices

On a more positive note, however, the introduction of research in the large polytechnics in New Zealand and the ‘new’ universities in Australia may also eventually come to signify a marked change in the way academic research (and therefore knowledge) is defined. James Gee notes that bi-discoursal people are ‘...the ultimate sources of change (Gee, 1996: 136).’ By bi-discoursal he means ‘...people who have or are mastering two contesting or conflicting discourses (Gee, 1996: 136).’ In this case people researching in polytechnics could be classed as bi-discoursal as they endeavour to bridge the still widely differing cultures of high-level academia and trades and community based education. Those who have their roots in the arts, community education and craft-based teaching will engage in research activities that differ from the western scientific model. In this way, they carry the potential for reshaping and redefining knowledge. James Gee (1996), writing about minority students in law school says:

The non-mainstream law student who manages to pull off recognizable and acceptable law school Discourse practices, but infuses them with aspects of her other discourses, is a source of challenge and change (Gee, 1996: 136).
Research cultures which are inclusive and operate on the borders, beyond and outside a strict western techno-scientific model can bear witness to the differend (Lyotard, 1984), and can therefore underpin a society and education based on variance; they can tell the small stories and the stories that would not have been told in an exclusionist environment. Importantly, inclusiveness refuses a class monopolisation of knowledge by a privileged group of expert researchers (Peters, 1997).

Another spin on the requirement to research and produce knowledge or at least ‘the novelty of an unexpected "move"', (Lyotard, 1984: 15) might be to ‘talk back’ through the research game much as critical pedagogy involves a ‘teaching back’, the encouragement of an ‘insurgent voice’ (Pennycook, 1994: 311). Those of us involved in the ‘research game’ need to continually question and challenge the system within which we operate. Instead of following the line of least resistance we need to test the new order to see if there is room for emancipation, choice, creativity and diversity, or whether these things are but a mirage covering a deep rooted consolidation of power in ever fewer hands.

The 1997 publication of the Tertiary Review Green Paper by the Ministry of Education would suggest that such cautionary words are not without reasonable foundations. The review, written entirely by Ministry of Education officials, without, as Anne Salmond has pointed out ‘...educational practitioners or students or community leaders ...(being) involved (Salmond, 1997)’ has shown many that the small
victories won by the universities in 1990 (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994) were in no way carved in stone. The paper appears to be entirely ideologically driven. Key propositions in the current paper which particularly affect research involve: contestability for all educational research funding; the complete commodification of the tertiary sector through ‘consumer’ driven funding; and increased government control of institutions (despite the decrease in government funding). Noticeable silences in the paper revolve around issues of professional development, retention of committed and able staff and academic freedom. Perhaps the most stunning and honest revelation of the ideologues’ motivation is the following suggestion:

...the current criteria for university status could be revised to focus more on the higher level of education rather than on the traditional characteristics of university education. This could include relaxing the requirement that a university should act as a critic and conscience of society... (Ministry of Education, 1997: 11).

So, just at the moment that the polytechnics could be using their growing academic status to increase the diversity and number of voices calling for difference and change in New Zealand society (to something more closely encompassing the notion of emancipatory, social democracy), that opportunity and indeed obligation may well be removed.
Bibliography


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