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A new enlightenment: Scottish FE as a source of emancipation

Steve Brown

Introduction

In *The Tempest*, Caliban expresses regret for allowing Prospero to take control of the island, lamenting his own loss of power and effective enslavement:

All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island.

(*The Tempest* Act 1, Sc. 2, 340-345)

Prospero's decision to enslave Caliban is motivated by a lack of trust, but also by an assumption that he, Prospero, knows how to rule the island better than Caliban. In the same way that Prospero uses his ill-gotten magic to exploit Caliban and the entire island, recent policies have transformed the

Scottish further education (FE) sector from something that intended to empower civil society into something that seeks to ‘create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur’ (Olssen et al, 2004: 136). This shift in focus from the societal to the individual gives the illusion of promoting individual autonomy, but is in fact indicative of a highly neoliberal conceptualisation of education which Gillies has described as a ‘subtle, insidious form of governance where ends can still be aimed at merely by shaping actors’ own choices’ (Gillies, 2011: 215).

This chapter explores the impact of the *neoliberal tempest* on the Scottish FE sector and ways in which the prioritisation of corporate needs over the wellbeing of communities has inhibited the sector’s potential to benefit society. It then presents a re-imagining of Scottish FE in a world that regards education as more than a source of human capital. A return to classical liberal values, embellished with the emancipatory overtones of critical pedagogy, can allow the sector to scratch out a new tune – one that allows FE professionals to dance again, unfettered by the indoctrinatory chains of “work-readiness”.

Historical background

Scotland had its own formal education system in place before the United Kingdom was formed. The post-reformation project of having a school in every parish was more or less achieved by the end of the seventeenth century, driven by what Smith describes as ‘a conscious effort to create a literate and informed public who would be able to take responsibility for their

own religious and civil life' (Smith, 2016: 7). This desire to use education to develop autonomous rational thought across all social classes became a key tenet of classical liberalism, and led to Scotland achieving such status as the centre of 18th century philosophy that Voltaire declared 'it is to Scotland that we look for our idea of civilization' (Skowronski, 2014: 1075).

Liberal philosophers regarded universal education as an essential means of allowing individuals to become freed from the 'guardians' who control both their thoughts and actions. In his essay *What is Enlightenment?* Kant argued that the development of capacities for individual rational autonomy would lead to a society that is naturally more accommodating of free thought, leading in turn to increased equality and social justice: 'At last free thought acts even on the fundamentals of government and the state finds it agreeable to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity' (Kant, 1784).

Despite its very obvious role as a provider of vocational training, the influences of classical liberalism on the Scottish FE sector were evident until very recently. Throughout the pre-devolution Thatcher years and the post-devolution New Labour era, attempts to neoliberalise FE were made through a managerialist approach to policymaking - one that sought to retain government control while removing government accountability (for examples see Mulderrig, 2015). However, Scottish Labour's commitment to social justice, equality and inclusion in the first few years of the 21st century (Riddell, 2009) ensured that the FE sector retained its role of serving local communities through the provision of part-time programmes, with funding available to cover childcare or travel expenses to facilitate access for harder-to-reach

individuals. The continued provision during the 2000s of a wide range of non-vocational evening courses (also known as “leisure courses”) embodies the liberalist view of education as a source of human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2010). A deliberate lack of instrumental focus allows people to learn for the sake of learning, with the autonomy to choose to study what interests them rather than what might benefit future employers. It can also be argued that part-time vocational courses, despite having the clear instrumental purpose of attaining a qualification and/or developing employability, were at least made accessible to more vulnerable members of society such as single parents or people on low incomes, thereby promoting social inclusion.

The neoliberal tempest

Caliban speaks of Prospero’s kindness towards him when he first came to the island:

When thou camest first,

Thou strok’dst me, and mad’st much of me; wouldst give me

Water with berries in’t

(*The Tempest* Act 1, Sc. 2, 334-336)

Prospero seduced Caliban into thinking that he would look after him, developing an unequal, yet mutually beneficial, relationship based on respect and the valuing of each other’s knowledge and expertise. In a similar way, recent education policy gives the impression that it seeks to benefit society by addressing the problem of youth unemployment. However, closer scrutiny suggests otherwise, with recent FE policy implying an agenda that is not

concerned with community learning needs, forcing the sector instead into a narrow, employability-focused remit. A 2011 Scottish Government report claimed that ‘the fundamental role of further education is to provide people with the skills they need to get a job (however far they are from the labour market), keep a job, or get a better job and develop a good career’ (Scottish Government, 2011: 10). A subsequent policy document entitled *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) called on colleges ‘...to reduce the level of youth unemployment...by 40% by 2021’ (Scottish Government, 2014: 46). This policy explicitly directs colleges to ‘deliver learning that is directly relevant to getting a job’ (ibid.: 15), encouraging stronger links with employers to allow colleges to adapt their curriculum so it is more closely aligned with industry needs.

This policy clearly advocates an approach grounded in Human Capital Theory, a neoliberal conceptualisation of education that regards learning as the development of human capital, which increases ‘capacities that contribute to economic production’ (Little, 2003: 438). While there is of course a societal benefit in addressing problems of youth unemployment, the all-pervasiveness of the employability agenda in the DYW policy has led to developments in the FE sector that seriously undermine classical liberal values. The call for colleges to provide full-time, vocational programmes that meet the specific requirements of employers led to the total number of college students dropping by 152,000 between 2008 and 2016, widely attributed to the axing of part-time courses (Whitaker, 2016). Furthermore, the range of study options available has narrowed, with a greater proportion of programmes available in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) as

they are perceived as more likely to lead to employment, at the expense of subjects less clearly associated with the workplace, or indeed courses aimed at more mature learners who are either already in work or retired. The practice of conceptualising education as a commodity that can be acquired for economic gain is, in Robeyns' view, 'severely limiting and damaging, as it does not recognize the intrinsic importance of education, nor the personal and collective instrumental social roles of education' (Robeyns, 2006: 74).

This disregard for the value of education in its own right directly conflicts with classical liberal values. Perhaps even more concerning, though, is the way in which DYW hands control of FE programme content directly to employers. Employers will naturally value a specific and limited set of skills and capacities in their staff – those that allow them to do their job well. They have no interest in developing capacities that might allow their staff to question or challenge employment practices, or indeed capacities to enhance people's knowledge, skills or development beyond the workplace. The application of Human Capital Theory to education policy naturally leads to a curriculum with a high level of instrumentalism, a narrow range of focus, and a disregard for criticality and autonomous thinking that strengthens the position of employers, and is ultimately *disempowering* for students as it merely indoctrinates them into the limited workplace opportunities presented within the parameters of the status quo.

In the same way, then, that Prospero seduces Caliban before enslaving him and forcing him into a life of mundane drudgery, recent FE policy in Scotland ultimately forces the FE sector to prioritise the needs of industry over communities. Furthermore, the preoccupation with employability

has not only led to the demise of non-instrumentalism and learner autonomy within FE programmes. The prioritisation of full-time programmes and the resulting loss of part-time places has limited opportunities for more vulnerable or disadvantaged members of society to gain access to FE programmes. While attempts to reduce youth unemployment are, of course, commendable, it is necessary to question the benefit of pursuing this goal if it comes at the expense of the wide range of learning opportunities that local communities have previously benefited from.

Another feature of neoliberal policymaking in the Scottish FE sector is the development of an increasingly performative culture that requires colleges to demonstrate their effectiveness according to over-simplistic performance criteria such as retention and attainment rates. The use of these statistics to measure “quality” naturally encourages colleges to become more risk-averse in their student recruitment practices, favouring students who are less likely to drop out or struggle to succeed. Coupled with a funding model that encourages colleges to pack as many students as possible into a single class (Scottish Funding Council, 2018), the system is not one that encourages the recruitment of harder-to-reach or vulnerable students who require additional support in order to achieve success. These risks to accessibility, inclusion and support reflect Coffield’s (1999) concerns that the application of Human Capital Theory in lifelong learning creates a ‘moral economy’ (Coffield, 1999: 485), in which individuals with greater capacities to learn are valued more highly than those without, leading to the exclusion of individuals who have little potential to make an economic contribution.

A new enlightenment?

Just as Prospero uses his power to relegate Caliban to a role of servitude, neoliberal policymaking has reconfigured the FE sector so that it is no longer concerned with the needs of those whom it educates, but is now required to ‘...enhance sustainable economic growth [by providing] a skilled workforce’ (Scottish Government, 2014: 7). The existential crisis that this creates for FE professionals has, understandably, led to considerable resentment among college lecturers, and several instances of industrial action in recent years have exacerbated industrial relations. Like Caliban lamenting his enslavement by Prospero, FE professionals feel that their position has been usurped, as they are forced to alter their praxis to address the needs of the powerful, at the expense of the vulnerable.

It is, however, possible to envision an alternative FE landscape in Scotland – one in which the constraints of neoliberal managerialism have been removed. For this to happen, though, the source of the current crisis needs to be exposed for what it is. Neoliberal policymaking works on the materialistic and unethical assumption that individuals exist in order to serve an economic need, and are therefore valued according to the potential economic contribution that they can make. Removing this assumption from the discourse would allow a return to previous liberal values, in which students are no longer regarded simply as workers or future workers, but as citizens within society. Prioritising societal development over economic growth allows the three classical liberal tenets of breadth, autonomy and non-instrumental purpose to return to the fore, elevating social and community values above corporate priorities.

In addition to evoking the principles of classical liberal education, an FE landscape unfettered by neoliberalism would also benefit from the introduction of more progressive pedagogies that aim to go beyond individual empowerment and towards social emancipation. Following the work of Freire (1996), Giroux (2011) describes critical pedagogy as being 'rooted in a project that is tied to the creation of an informed, critical citizenry capable of participating and governing in a democratic society' (Giroux, 2011: 7). Such a project aims to raise the critical consciousness of students by exploring how locations of power affect their position within society. Rather than encouraging compliance with the inequalities of the neoliberal status quo, a critical-emancipatory approach can instead develop capacities to identify and challenge neoliberalism's inherent injustices, with a view to implementing change. Rather than creating a society that works for the economy, critical pedagogy prioritizes social justice over economic growth. This takes learning beyond the narrow, financially-driven limitations of neoliberalism, and also goes beyond the classical liberal goal of individual empowerment. Guided by the principles of critical pedagogy, FE can exceed the classical liberal ambition of empowering students to be more successful within existing social structures. It can also give students the capacities to engage critically with these structures, to identify inequality and injustice, to consider alternatives, and to become actively involved in the positive transformation of society.

Conclusion

Neoliberal ideology, as the name suggests, appears at first to be merely an extension of the “invisible hand” proposed by the classical liberal economist Adam Smith during the Scottish Enlightenment – the idea that market forces act as a form of self-regulation. However, Smith never envisioned the application of capitalist principles to a field such as education which, from a classical liberal perspective, functions as a common good and a source of empowerment for individuals within society. The Scottish government’s neoliberal approach to FE policy has consigned the sector to a role of servitude that is comparable with Prospero’s enslavement of Caliban, and leaves those who work in the Scottish FE sector feeling disillusioned and resentful about being co-opted into a neoliberal project that promotes inequality and incorporation.

The prioritisation of industry needs over community needs described in this chapter, the concomitant de-prioritisation of learning opportunities for more vulnerable members of society (Coffield 1999), and the breakdown in industrial relations resulting from recent reforms and funding crises (for example McIvor 2019), all imply that Scottish FE is in dire need of a re-boot. The sector would benefit from a return to the values that existed before the implementation of the current, neoliberal project – when education sought to empower individuals to become successful and autonomous members of society. However, it would be even more beneficial to society for FE to extend its ambition, so it seeks to empower *beyond* existing social structures. These structures themselves need to be challenged, and ultimately replaced by a new imaginary, one that seeks to address – rather than perpetuate – power imbalances. In the same way that Prospero’s return to Milan frees Caliban

from the magical bonds that forced him into slavery, removing the neoliberal constraints from Scottish FE would allow the sector once again to prioritise its societal role and to consider how it can benefit - rather than facilitate the exploitation of – the communities it serves. Scotland’s first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has recently referred to Scottish enlightenment philosophy, arguing that ‘...the objective of economic policy should be collective well-being – how happy and healthy a population is, not just how wealthy’ (Sturgeon 2019). Perhaps this signals a revised approach to policymaking – one that the Scottish FE sector desperately needs.

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