The need for critical learning, and the political implications of the practice of heutagogy as it relates to the future of the university

Introduction

First described by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon, “heutagogy” is an educational technique that bases itself upon a radically student-centric approach. Heutagogical practice emphasises the full autonomy of the learner at all points of the educational process: from setting the curriculum to self-assessment in relation to self-determined learning goals. Within this framework, the teacher becomes a facilitator whose role it is to aid the student in their engagement with a self-critical learning process. [[1]](#footnote-1) The technique is intended to create “self-determined learning” in which the individual is capable of continual and autonomous intellectual self-development.[[2]](#footnote-2) Heutagogy is highly suited to new high-tech modes of teaching, and the Internet has been central in developing heutalogical communities of learners whose members work collaboratively to support each other’s practice.

Between the market and the university

Given its focus on autonomous self-improvement, it is unsurprising that heutagogy is seen as a perfect educational practice for the fast-paced of change of the modern workplace, in which the need to continually develop new skills is paramount. The vision of a continually self-improving workforce is one that is obviously attractive to businesses, but, at the same time, heutagogy “has received limited attention from higher education and researchers”.[[3]](#footnote-3) This might seem strange when universities are consciously engaged in encouraging independent academic development and creative forms of learning amongst their students and teachers. There are, however, various reasons for their lack of embrace of heutagogy, two of the most prominent among which are the relatively centralised structure of knowledge within the university system, and the university’s role of authorising accredited degrees.[[4]](#footnote-4) The thing that makes heutagogy a potentially attractive model for businesses (i.e. its decentralised model of learning based entirely in the individual’s continual self-improvement), is thus precisely that which creates problems for its implementation within the university system, and this points to an underlying tension in this system as a whole.

The Future of the University

As Steven Schwartz, recognised in a column in the *Times Higher Educational Suppliment* in May 2003, the debate over the purpose of the university is an ancient one.[[5]](#footnote-5) A panel discussion, published more recently in the *Guardian*’s education supplement (24 August 2012), offered an idea of what this debate currently looks like. Key amongst its points was that the future of education will most likely involve increasing decentralisation, use of the internet as a delivery medium, and that, more likely than not, business and the post-university world of work will increasingly come to shape the education sector.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this way, the future might look quite bright for heutagogy.

These developments would represent a continuation of the changes that have been taking place in the last few decades, and during the panel Tamson Pietsch made an important point regarding the Internet and autodidactic forms of learning that illuminates another potential reason for the lack of wide-scale adoption of heutagogy within the university system. She argues that universities are institutions that both foster and sanction knowledge, and this raises some interesting points in relation to heutagogy’s decentralised model of practice and suggests certain problems if the method is practiced uncritically.

Conclusion

The question of who sanctions knowledge raises an interesting problem for the future of university system, and for those who advocate for the practice of heutagogy. The modern university was an institution committed to broadly liberal ideals of truth and freedom. As such, it saw its goal in terms of the development of learners who strove for the attainment of these values in their work. With the dissolution of this function and the creation of a marketplace of universities whose goals become the attainment of employment by their graduates, there is a profound shift from their role as “sanctioners” of knowledge.

The implication of this shift is related to the risks of an uncritically practiced heutagogy as a model for learning – it raises the question of who learning is for, and who benefits from it? The attractiveness of heutagogic methods to business might well be that people can be encouraged to direct themselves towards the narrow acquisition of skills whose main beneficiary is business rather than the individual. This is not to say that heutagogy is not a potentially radical form of education, and indeed, in a different context the autodidactic example of worker’s libraries in the early twentieth century shows the potential for politically oppositional forms of education to challenge the dominance of institutional forms of learning. What is needed, however, is a continually critical approach to the problem and status of knowledge, and this increasingly effects the university system just as much as experimental leaning practices.

1. Mason, Tom (2004) ”Finding Facilitation and Heutagogy.” Available at: https://heutagogycop.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/finding-facilitation-heutagogy/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hace and Kenyon cited in Blaschke, Lisa Marie (2012) “Heutagogy and Lifelong Learning: A Review of Heutagogical Practice and Self-Determined Learning.” Available at: http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1076/2087 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blaschke (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On this Blaschke cites McAuliffe et al.’s statement that “the removal of the educator makes the concept of heutagogy impractical in a credentialing institution,” and writes of the impracticality of implementing a full-blown educational framework of heutagogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schwarz, Steven (2003) “The higher purpose”. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/columnists/the-higher-purpose/176727.article [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/aug/24/higher-education-in-2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)