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University Teaching as Entertainment?

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University Teaching as Entertainment?

Summary

This short paper offers the outline for a discussion topic that is of interest to me and might be of interest to other students in my own discipline (Library and Information Science), namely, whether university instruction is becoming a form of entertainment and if so, whether this a desirable feature of university teaching. The evidence for my presentation stems from my personal observations as both an undergraduate and graduate student.

Keywords

active learning, analysis, debate

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Objectives

I want to talk about the abovementioned issue because I am concerned that the ratings that instructors and professors are subject to may indirectly influence their teaching styles and behaviour towards students. Instructors and professors may modify their teaching not to provide a better education, but to increase their ratings and popularity amongst students, specially when teaching at the undergraduate level. This observation is important for future academic librarians because they often need to impart information literacy instruction sessions to undergraduate students and may risk becoming entertainers as opposed to educators.

My colleagues may benefit by reflecting upon the current developments of university teaching and the dangers of conferring too much importance to instructor ratings as opposed to instruction itself. My colleagues should attend this session to reflect about their own teaching styles and to identify situations in which instructor rating and/or the need to gain popularity amongst students may get in the way of a good teaching practices.

By the end of this session participants will have learnt neither a particular skill nor fact, however they will have reflected on a topic of importance in contemporary university instruction. Reflection during the session may inspire some participants to pursue further research on the topic or to adopt certain attitudes and/or behaviours, however, these are not the main objectives of the session. The principal objective that I want to accomplish is to make my colleagues think about the development of higher education and the possible danger that lies in making university instruction a form of entertainment.

Short summaries of references

The main evidence used for the presentation of my topic stems from my personal experience both as an undergraduate and graduate student. Complementing my experience there are three sources that I will mention in my talk. In the following paragraphs I briefly summarize and explain these three sources.

The last section of Plato's (2003) *Republic* criticizes the role played by the poets in Ancient Greece. During the fourth and third c. BCE, when writing was in its early stages of development, the poets had a major educational role. In general, people acquired certain knowledge through memorization and repetition of epic poetry such as Homer's (1990) *The Iliad*. However, Plato criticized the education that poets imparted because it was not based mainly on facts but on opinion. Plato argued that opinion is subject to change and therefore unreliable, whereas true knowledge (for Plato knowledge of the "Forms") provides access to unchangeable patterns. For Plato the ancient poets imitated reality, but reality itself is an imitation of the true forms, therefore the representations rendered by poets are twice unreliable and thus must be avoided. Plato's work is interesting because he criticizes ancient poets for being entertainers as opposed to real educators.

Postman and Plagia (2010) discuss how the technologies of both print and television influence the way audiences think. Tangentially they also discuss the relationship between education and technology, the following quotation from them is very inspirational and will be read during my presentation:

now it [humour] is used simply to win the student's attention. Consequently, drawing an audience—rather than teaching—becomes the focus of education, and that is what television does. School is the one

institution in the culture that should present a different worldview: a different way of knowing, of evaluating, of assessing. What worries me is that if school becomes so overwhelmed by entertainment's metaphors and metaphysics, then it becomes not content-centered but attention centered, like television, chasing "ratings" or class attendance. If school becomes that way then the game may be lost, because school is using the same approach, epistemologically, as television (263).

Postman and Plagia's work is important because they spell out the danger of transforming education into a an entertainment business.

From a very different perspective Suzuki (1989) offers a reflection on how the privatization of university research projects in Canada affects the output and quality of research that is done at Canadian universities. Suzuki's approach is interesting because extrapolating his critique can help us understand in what ways the corporatization of universities in North America may affect the way instruction is transformed from being a way to educate and form future researchers to entertain "customers."

Content & organization

The 45 minutes of my talk will be broken down in the following way:

- a) Minutes 1-5: Introduction of both myself and my topic.
- b) Minutes 5-15: The role of the poets as educators and entertainers in Ancient Greece. Guiding question: Can educating and entertaining boost each other or are these two activities antagonistic?
- c) Minutes 15-25: Television as a teaching metaphor. Guiding question: Are some current teaching practices resembling the entertaining practices of television?
- d) Minutes 25-35: Privatization of universities, instructor ratings, students and "customers." Guiding question: Is there an evident relationship between ownership, managerial approaches, and teaching styles in higher education?
- e) Minutes 35-40: Period for questions and/or clarification of concepts.
- f) Minutes 40-45: Conclusion.

Presentation strategies

The introduction and conclusion will be the only two segments that will be taught in a lecture style, other than the introduction and the conclusion the persons attending the presentation will be encouraged to participate from the start of the session. In other words, sections "b," "c," "d," and "e" will be conducted in a seminar style in order to generate participation and increase the level of engagement of the people attending the presentation. During sections "b," "c," and "d" participants will be divided into groups of three or four and will be asked to discuss the guiding question of each section (see above) during three minutes or so and then talk about it. It is believed that encouraging participants to engage with the topic will facilitate reflection on the presented issue, which is my main objective.

References

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