

Cultural Psychology of Education

Volume 7

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Sustainable Futures for Higher Education

The Making of Knowledge Makers

 Springer

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Preface of the Series Editor

*Your true educators and formative
teachers reveal to you
what the real raw material of your being is,
something quite uneducable,
yet in any case accessible only with
difficulty, bound, paralyzed:
your educators can be only your liberators
(Nietzsche, 1983, p. 126)*

Higher Education: Oppression or Liberation?

Higher education is both oppressive and oppressed in its current state! During the last decade, in the increasing frequency of my academic travels and in the events of my own professional trajectory, I have been facing those negative aspects of the academic life, over and over again. In different countries, I have met Ph.D. students oppressed by the pressure to strictly follow the methodological and theoretical framework of analysis of their supervisors. I have witnessed their passionate striving for the intellectual right of exploring new ways of doing research. I have seen them systematically downsized by the rigid system of rules in place almost everywhere in order to have their dissertations accepted. The same form of oppression is in place when one wants to have her articles published. The existing monologic and evidence-based way to define what is “scientifically relevant” is the major oppressive force against the knowledge construction.

Science emerges in dialogue. The overabundant restrictions of any sort are killing the intellectual effort to produce new system of thoughts.

Higher education should be the platform for helping human beings in finding a variety of codes to make sense of the experiences. Getting a degree does not make the university student better than another illiterate fellow. It only provides the way to escape a standardized and common sense modality of understanding the reality. Higher education is then about freedom! Or, at least it should be.

We are instead observing that the higher education system is performing like a military or religious educational setting, where the adherence to a certain credo or set of rules is more valued than any exploration of new possible worlds (Marsico 2015).

Yet the academic system is oppressed by different economic instances. As several authors in the book discuss, higher education should be indeed sustainable, usable, and transferable. These parameters are rooted in the new pressing standards of productivity and in the new ideology of practical usability of science and technology. This leads, for example, to the monstrosity of the ongoing debate in the Italian educational system about taking discipline as “art” of the curriculum. This is just an outrage, but it is perfectly understandable if one assumes the rampant contemporary pragmatic stance on education.

Valsiner, Lutsenko, and Antoniouk’s book provides the social–cultural and historical coordinates to understand the complexity of the twenty-first-century universities all over the world. They accompany the reader, throughout a variety of contributions, to understand why the original Humboldtian spirit is almost suppressed, in favor of a technologization and commodification of the knowledge construction. Is there any possibility to get it back?

If the University of Antarctica Project (Valsiner 2018a) is a utopia (even if a humorous one), the “university without borders” is a concrete example of a possible use of the private marketing system applied to higher education. This book seems to suggest a possible way to play the game and make a creative use (or cheat) some of the current neoliberalism trends that dominate the academic world.

In the Conclusion chapter of the volume, Jaan Valsiner claims that: “*Academics are naïve. They like to believe in the beautiful ideals of academic freedom and the relevance of their life-works* (Valsiner 2018b p. XXX). I do agree, and I still consider this naïveté the only way to resist the incumbent forms of oppression and to preserve the higher education system from its ultimate dissolution.

Salvador da Bahia, Brazil
May 2018

Giuseppina Marsico

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Preface

Utopia for Practice: The University of Antarctica Project

The bubble of higher education in our globalizing world is on the verge of bursting. The economic bases for sustaining the autonomy of universities are becoming limited, and the funding from corporate or governmental resources setup constrains upon the knowledge creation functions of higher education. Through the noble idea that higher education should contribute to *the society*, we can observe various practices of turning universities into factories of mass producing specialists with certificates of various competences. Higher education is increasingly widespread among ordinary citizens who nevertheless are dependent on the economic realities of job markets—with, or without, such educational achievements. The diplomas and various degree certificates are outcome markers of higher education.

Would the arrival at these outcomes be linked with producing new knowledge? That question is increasingly difficult to answer in a framework where ever new “quality assessment” schemes are being introduced. The assessed “quality” of the ways in which higher education certificates are being obtained may grow, but universities can be seen increasingly turned into extensions of secondary education institutions. They become “schools” with fixed timetable of lectures, examinations, and requirements—rather than arenas where young eager and interested students search for new basic ways to understand the world, together with their teachers who continue their similar quest for knowledge over their life course.

At the same time of the making of schools out of universities, we can observe the increasing interest in appropriation of the new knowledge that could emerge in the higher education context. It is becoming a regular practice that students’ research projects become copyrighted by the universities to which they belong. Similarly, in many fields of commercial profit possibilities different corporations are ready to capture the patents-ready knowledge (and knowledge makers) by providing funding for the kind of research of their interests. Under the conditions of diminishing public funding of universities and regular need for resources, universities are often ready—or even desiring—such financial support from the private business. The

new knowledge created in universities with the funding of corporations is made into the intellectual property that is patented—and hence vanishes from the public domain. The knowledge potential of universities becomes restricted—and the autonomy of the universities limited. On the other side—in case of the public nature of the universities—it is the government fiscal and political system that curbs the growth of universities.

Over my four decades in academic life experiencing universities all over the world and seeing similar struggles everywhere, a utopian—half-joking—project for an ideal university has at times occurred to me. This utopia—I call it my “University of Antarctica Project”—is of course a slightly ironic joke. It entails the image of building a new university somewhere where the political interests of governments may be remote—Antarctica may be the only remaining place on the Globe for that. The University of Antarctica would have very silent and eager students (penguins?) who would politely listen to the active faculty members who sit in the snow and discuss futures of basic science. And when bored by such discussions, the “students” would just jump into the water to go fishing. Sustainability of such utopian idea may be laughingly questioned and considered. Yet it has some features that would improve the present state of affairs in universities worldwide. This university would have no faculty meetings that would sidetrack the academics from their main function—creating knowledge—into socially situated practices of mundane gossip, infighting, and useless voting for oftentimes irrelevant causes. There would be no “sexual harassment policies”—as one would not expect the faculty to have either knowledge or inclination to relate this way toward the diligently obedient penguins. There will be no need for “diversity policies” as the homogeneous white environment of snow and ice would bring to clear focus the diversity of the faculty members from their environments and from the students. It would be an ideal university most of us in our mischievous minds have desired as we entered into academia—and rarely if ever found in reality. Humorous reflection upon ourselves is a great necessity in the lives of today’s academics.

Of course, this project is deeply utopian—none of us would happily relocate from our home bases to the wide snowfields of Antarctica, even if the opportunities were given and salaries raised from the real to normal levels. Building utopias is one of the few privileges we have in universities governed by the new management models, and maybe from these it may be possible to learn how to build something really new within the given settings. The key question is *adequate autonomy* of the universities—a notion known since the nineteenth century in Europe under the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt. It could be possible to introduce silent reorganizational forms into our actual university lives so as to protect and develop the autonomy of higher education. It is only through the maintenance and proliferation of such relative independence that the service to societies that is *ahead* of the immediate needs of the society. If the knowledge base of a society is equal to its present needs, all science would become applied science and lose its generative power.

This book was conceived in the framework of wider thinking of science and society relationship that go beyond the immediate issues of “needs of *the* society.” Given the high heterogeneity of goals-directed institutional interests within any society that usually contradict or sometimes clash with one another, talking of any version of unified interests or needs of *the* society can only be non-trusted (Valsiner 2005). I was interested in building a multi-sided look at knowledge construction in systems of higher education in general—through juxtaposing the experiences of educators from different societies. As a lucky coincidence, Alexandra Antoniouk organized a Humboldt Kolleg Meeting in Kyiv on June 12–15, 2014, on the general theme *Education and Science and their Role in Social and Industrial Progress of Society*. A number of contributions to this book were solicited after the meeting in Kyiv—hence this volume has a definite “Ukrainian accent.” Our gratitude goes to Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for promotion of the theme of society and education relationships that becomes particularly important in areas on the world where new developments are currently unfolding—such as India, New Zealand, Brazil, Ukraine, and Estonia (to name the coverage of participants in this volume). I hope that the variety of ideas found in this book will reach the creative minds of potential builders of new forms of higher education—at the times when the creation of new universities can be taken out of the close political confines of any kind. The task of preparation of knowledge makers needs to be solved by the people who are actually guiding the *Bildung*—rather than by politicians of limited time horizons in their careers or accountants for whom immediate economizing on current facilities blurs the horizon for future gains.

Aalborg, Denmark

Jaan Valsiner

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Endorsement

Universities are more than ever on the cusp of disruptive and radical changes while struggling to keep their traditional remit from falling entirely into the hands of managers and accountants. This wide-ranging volume addresses the important changes facing higher education from multiple perspectives and divergent cultural viewpoints. A timely and befitting collection of thoughtful papers that should do much to stimulate conversation and debate on the crucial issues facing the university today.

Henderikus Stam, former President, International Society of Theoretical Psychology.

Contents

Part I Introduction: Higher Education at Crossroads: Between Knowledge and Commerce

- 1 Changing Views of Knowledge and Practice in American Higher Education** 3
Nancy Budwig
- 2 When the Market Wins Over Research and Higher Education** 23
Sylvie Paycha

Part II Economic Factors in Contemporary Higher Education

- 3 Organizational Learning Mechanisms and Corporate Entrepreneurial Orientation** 31
Anastasiia Lutsenko
- 4 The Role of Venture Capital in the National Innovative System** 39
Larisa Antoniuk and Anastasiia Zaproviuduk
- 5 The Emerging Technology as an Economic Policy Category** 45
Vitalii Gryga
- 6 Scientific Cooperation in Basic Research and Higher Education** 53
Olha Krasovska, Valentyna Andrushchenko and Irina Velichko
- 7 Key Tendencies of Scientific and Technological Development in Ukraine and Its International Dimension (Review of Statistical Indicators)** 59
Igor Yegorov

8	Technological Transformations and Their Implications for Higher Education	67
	Petro Smertenko, O. Dimitriev, Lidia Pochekaïlova and L. Cernyshov	
9	Building the (Higher)Education Stakeholder: The Realities of Economics in Higher Education	77
	Geanina Nae and Virgil Nae	
Part III Universities in the Middle of Globalization		
10	Making Universities Grow: The New Zealand Experience	99
	Robert D. Greenberg	
11	Challenges for Higher Education: The Case of Ukraine	109
	Andriy Stavvtskyy	
12	Global Competitiveness of Universities	115
	Volodymyr Satsyk	
13	Good University and Excellent Professor: Competing Quality Perspectives in Higher Education	123
	Mati Heidmets, Maiki Udam, Kätlin Vanari and Birgit Vilgats	
14	Science and Higher Education in Poland: Changing Rules	141
	Adam Borkowski	
15	New India—Universities in the Middle of Economic Development	151
	Girishwar Misra and Rishabh Kumar Mishra	
16	The Constitutive Crisis of Universities: Born to Be for Few, Challenged to Be for All	175
	Jorge Tarcísio Da Rocha Falcão	
Part IV What Kinds of Knowledge Makers?		
17	Selected Theses on Science	189
	Eugene S. Kryachko	
18	Educating Journalists: Towards Philosophical Sophistication	207
	Eleonora Shestakova	
19	Manufacturing the Industrial Citizen	219
	Joshua W. Clegg, Joseph A. Ostenson and Bradford J. Wiggins	
20	Educating Specialists in the Context of Postmodern Citizenship: Keep Calm and Carry on	233
	Jorge Castro-Tejerina	

Part V Current Collaborations and Future Needs in Knowledge Making

21 Education Without Fear: Going Beyond the *Curriculae* 247
Sarah Dick, Jennifer Hausen, Lina Jacob Carande, Franziska Sawitzki
and Marisa Tenbrock

22 Creativity in Higher Education: Apprenticeship as a “Thinking Model” for Bringing Back More Dynamic Teaching and Research in a University Context 263
Lene Tanggaard

23 Beyond Examinations and Assessment: Pathways to Productivity 279
Rebekka Mai Eckerdal

24 *Non Vitae Sed Scholae Discimus* 295
Dominik S. Mihalits and Natalie Rodax

25 Implementation of Curriculum Theory in Formation of Specialists in Higher Education 305
Kaarel Haav

Part VI General Conclusions: *Quo Vadis*, Higher Education?

26 What Has Happened to Quality? 313
Thomas Szulevicz and Casper Feilberg

27 Higher Education: From Intellectual Asylum and Fulfilling of Social Orders to Creating Arenas for Scientific Revolutions 327
Jaen Valsiner