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Education as an End in Itself

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Abstract
Education is guided by unquestioned ideologies. In Thailand, and in most countries, the predominant educational ideology, as evinced by quotations from influential Thai educational policy makers, is economic efficiency which sees the main goal of education as training students to be useful employees in the workplace. This paper argues that economic efficiency as the driving ideology of education shortchanges students by ignoring the goal of fostering their intellectual growth - the ideology of academic rationalism. The implications for educational practice of academic rationalism, where knowledge is seen as valuable in and of itself, are considered, especially in terms of recent changes in the socio-cultural and technological environment of students. Challenges from recent technological changes include more distractions, less time for contemplation and a reduction in the importance placed on in-depth knowledge. Key implications include the need to provide exposure to 'high-quality' knowledge, the importance of stimulating curiosity, and the need to encourage in-depth reading.

Keywords: educational ideology, academic rationalism, deep reading

1. Introduction

Education in crisis' is a constant mantra, the apparent failures of education are the source of frequent articles in newspapers, and politicians regularly give speeches about the need to reform education for the sake of the country's future. Many of the reforms suggested are superficial band-aids that do little to tackle underlying issues or "quick fixes for deep-seated educational problems" (Paul and Elder, 2007: 4). If we really want to address the crises in education, we need to go back to first principles and consider the goals of education. Why does education exist? What do we hope graduates will gain from an education? These questions concern the ideologies underpinning education. In this paper, I will examine the underlying educational ideologies in Thailand with particular reference to higher education, and look at alternative ideologies that can provide different directions for pulling education out of its current crises.

2. Educational ideologies

Educational ideologies are unquestioned and pervasive. Almost never consciously considered, ideologies are "taken-for-granted ways of making sense of the world" (Meighan and Harber, 2007: 212). As broad sets of ideas and beliefs, ideologies guide decision making and perceptions. We tend to judge as good those things which match our ideologies and, if we have

the opportunity, change those things which do not match our ideologies. Where certain ideologies are dominant and widely shared, especially among those who have the power to make changes, the ideologies become mechanisms of social control (Lamm, 1986), with ideologies controlling people's behaviour more than people control their ideologies. In examining education, it therefore becomes critical to investigate the ideologies of those people who have the power to make changes, in other words, the key influential policy makers.

Several typologies of educational ideologies have been proposed. At the highest level, Lyotard (1984) views ideologies as focusing either on performativity (the performance of students, teachers and institutions) or empowerment (nebulous concepts such as lifelong learning, changing society, and wisdom). At a more specific level, the prototypical performative ideology is *economic efficiency* (Richards, 2002) or instrumentalism (Mitchell, 2014) where the main goal of education is to develop a skilled workforce to serve a country's economic competitiveness. The most common empowering ideologies are *learner-centredness* (Richards, 2002) or progressivism (Mitchell, 2014) where education is seen as meeting individuals' needs and aspirations, *academic rationalism* (Richards, 2002) or liberal humanism (Mitchell, 2014) where the goal of education is to foster intellectual growth, and *reconstructionism* (Mitchell, 2014; Richards, 2002) where education is seen as a means to change society (perhaps best illustrated in the work of Paolo Freire e.g. 1972).

Historically, universities were largely ideologically autonomous, but the sociocultural pressures of the shift to postmodern international capitalism and free-market economics since the 1980s have led to an ever-increasing emphasis on performative, instrumental ideologies (Broadfoot, 1998). The influence of the economic efficiency ideology can be seen in the growth of standardised testing and international rankings of both student and university performance.

3. The dominant educational ideology in Thailand

In line with international trends, the ideology of economic efficiency has also come to dominate Thai education. In the most recent educational reform plan set up by the Thai Ministry of Education in August 2014, nine areas to focus on were identified. The second of these (after adjusting the school curriculum) is "developing higher and vocational education to be in line with the domestic labour demand" (Intathep, 2014: 4). This latest reform plan continues a long tradition of reform being guided by the ideology of economic efficiency. The previous plan, for example, identified six key issues, one of which was manpower production and developments to enhance the country's competitive capability; and the various versions of the National Education Standards argue that education is essential for "vigorous competitiveness in the international arena" (Office of the National Education Council, 2004: 1).

The dominance of the ideology of economic efficiency is also apparent in statements made by key Thai educational policy makers and influencers. For instance:

> "Education is important to Thailand because quality education will produce a valuable workforce that could serve the demand in the globalised world and improve the country's competitiveness ... The objective is to develop quality people so we will have knowledgeable workers for the globalised world. The country's competitiveness will improve significantly and noticeably over the next 10 years. By then, we will be able to compete with any rivals in the region."
>
> (Wijit Srisa-arn, then-Minister of Education, 2007)
>
> "The Education Ministry's panel on human resources planning put the blame [for graduates not finding jobs] squarely on the universities for turning out graduates who fail to meet the needs of the labour market."

(Veeravat Wannasiri, Chair, Private Vocational Schools Association, 2007)

> [Arguing for an increase in English teaching in the curriculum] "That is a dismal state of affairs to be in, when we know that export growth, GDP expansion and even per capita income increase have a direct correlation with English proficiency"
>
> (Surin Pitsuwan, former Secretary-General of ASEAN, 2013)

Such quotations (and these are only a small selection) give an idea of the dominance of economic efficiency in Thai educational policy makers' thinking. The need for education to focus on labour market demands to serve the country's competitiveness appears to be unquestioned, with alternative ideologies never considered. Although, in practice, economic efficiency drives much of the thinking in Thai education, its dominance does need to be questioned for three reasons.

First, although largely overlooked in policy making and planning, the highest formal document governing Thai education is the National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). Unlike nearly every other official document on Thai education, the Act does not emphasise economic efficiency; rather, it appears to prioritise learner-centredness. In Section 22, we find "The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality", and in Section 28, "The substance of the curricula, both academic and professional, shall aim at human development".

A second reason for questioning economic efficiency is that it devalues and stands in contrast to the 'real' goals of education. For instance,

> "To see an education, college or otherwise, as merely a way to increase the amount of money you make is a terrible corruption and fundamentally unsustainable. Education was never intended that way, and it cannot succeed on those grounds." If learning is not for its own sake, it isn't liberal learning. It's a utilitarian calculus for material self-advancement. The important things are not worth knowing because they are useful. They are worth knowing because they are true."
>
> (Sullivan, 2011)

Thirdly, from a critical perspective, there are arguments that the focus on economic efficiency actually hides an ulterior motive of suppressing disempowered sections of the population:

> "This instrumental need for education viewed people as tools for economic growth. Children were supposed to learn how to become efficient and obedient workers and subjects. The goal was not for most of those children to enjoy the fruits of development during their lifetime but rather for them to work for the good of the "nation" which truly meant the growth of Bangkok and the interests of the elite."
>
> (Feigenblatt et al. 2010: 301)

These three reasons for questioning the dominance of the economic efficiency ideology represent the three empowering ideologies discussed above. The National Education Act is guided by the ideology of learner centredness; Sullivan's criticism of educational goals is based on the ideology of academic rationalism; and Feigenblatt at al.'s argument is reconstructionist.

Despite these criticisms, a key argument in favour of the economic efficiency ideology, as shown in the Veeravat Wannasiri quotation above, is that basing education on economic needs helps graduates find employment. While we all want graduates to attain gainful employment, it is not actually clear whether education based on the goal of improving a country's economic competitiveness achieves this. Admittedly, graduates from some humanities subjects may find that their studies do not match the job market, but for more employment-oriented degrees it is

unclear whether designing the programme to match employers' requirements leads to better long-term employment prospects. This is especially the case in the current socioeconomic environment where soft skills and an ability to continue learning and to adapt are emphasised.

For instance, ABET, the accrediting board for engineering at American universities, created a list of expected programme outcomes (see ABET, 2006) that include:

- an ability to communicate effectively;
- the broad education necessary to understand the impact of engineering solutions in a global and societal context;
- a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in, life-long learning;
- a knowledge of contemporary issues.

Intangible goals such as these are difficult to achieve in a performatively-oriented education system. Performative ideologies, such as economic efficiency, emphasise specific, tangible, measurable goals which may not be best suited to the present employment environment. If one of the key arguments in favour of economic efficiency is invalid, we should examine whether the Thai education system can be better founded on a different ideology.

4. The case for academic rationalism

In searching for alternatives to the economic efficiency ideology, I will focus on academic rationalism (for reasons I hope will become apparent). To start with, I will look at what influential figures from history believed the goals of education should be.

The culture with the greatest influence on mankind's thinking is ancient Greece, specifically Athens. Ancient Greece has strong claims to founding philosophy and mathematics (Thales of Miletus), science (Democritus) and history (Herodotus). How the ancient Greeks viewed education, therefore, may be of some import. Typical views include "Knowledge should be sought with a view to the beautiful and the good" (Socrates) and "Education's end is the pleasure of knowing itself" (Aristotle). Such quotations match the Sullivan quotation above, where knowledge is not seen as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, the view of academic rationalism.

Similar arguments are made throughout history by influential thinkers. For instance, Cardinal Newman said "Knowledge is capable of being its own end", and Charles Eliot, President of Harvard University for 40 years, said "Education is the enthusiastic study of subjects for the love of them without any ulterior objects". Indeed, academic rationalism is the most frequently cited educational ideology historically, and underpinned university education until it came to be challenged by economic efficiency with the socioeconomic shift to postmodern capitalism about thirty years ago.

Academic rationalism's goals are intangible - fostering intellectual growth, developing rationality, and encouraging a personal commitment to learning. These fit with the intangible ABET goals mentioned above of a broad education and an ability to engage in life-long learning. Academic rationalism views some knowledge as inherently more valuable than other knowledge, and, in its traditional form, this more valuable knowledge consisted of the 'canon' or the classics of Western thought, such as Shakespeare, Hume, Darwin and Proust. In this way, academic rationalism created a distinction between the elite and the masses, and heavily emphasised the former.

Such a distinction is difficult to justify in the present cultural environment, especially with the massive growth in the number of university students. Combined with the fact that the

proponents of academic rationalism quoted above lived hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago, the question needs to be raised of whether academic rationalism is of any relevance today.

5. Valuable knowledge

Academic rationalism is predicated on the belief that there is some knowledge that is worth knowing and that knowing this knowledge fosters intellectual growth. Traditionally, the knowledge worth knowing is taken as the Western canon which is seen as containing timeless truths. The canon is not just seen as reinforcing existing cultural structures, but individuals' responses to reading the canon can make it revolutionary, rather than reactionary. In Denby's (1996) critique, the works in the canon "jar so many student habits, violate so many contemporary pieties, and challenge so many forms of laziness" (p. 461). These are the basis of true critical thinking.

With postmodernism, the Western canon came under heavy attack. The authors of the canon were termed 'dead white European males' to highlight cultural biases in selecting texts to include in the canon. These criticisms sought to replace the canon in one of two ways. Some criticisms still acknowledged that some knowledge is worth knowing, but argued that the cultural biases of the traditional canon meant that it should be replaced with a multicultural canon. Other criticisms, founded in relativism, argued that all writing is a product of its own context and environment, and that no writing is necessarily of any greater value than any other writing. These relativists often went further, arguing that the focus on writing showed bias and that any type of 'signage' (posters, music, television programmes etc.) was of equal value.

While relativists gained some ground in Western universities, the extremes of relativism were criticised even by mainstream postmodernists. For instance, Harvey (1980: 328) worried that relativist extremism meant that "ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths". While there is some basis to the criticism of the cultural biases of the traditional Western canon, the relativist argument that everything holds the same value would lead to a ridiculous aberrant form of education where anything goes.

We therefore need to consider what knowledge is "capable of being its own end", and, while this should not be restricted to the traditional canon, the work of dead white European males should not be excluded by default. The shift from higher education being elite to being available to the masses, however, means that the student population has significantly changed since the traditional Western canon was set up (a fact that is the starting point for Bloom's (1987) famous thesis in favour of academic rationalism, *The Closing of the American Mind*). Coupled with the fact that much of the canon is not available in languages such as Thai, we may need to look for texts that are easier to access than the traditional canon, while still thought-provoking and challenging. For literature, we might consider books such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves, all accessible books that regularly appear on lists of the 100 greatest novels, and quality literature in other languages such as จดหมายจากเมืองไทย [*Letters from Thailand*] by Botan. To address the ABET outcomes of a broad education and knowledge of contemporary issues, we might also consider high-quality non-fiction books, such as *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould, *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond, and *Bad Science* by Ben Goldacre. Such choices are necessarily somewhat subjective, but exposure to high-quality literature and non-fiction is crucial for a real education. If "an educated person is one whose natural curiosity has been awakened with the purpose of satisfying that curiosity" (Marelisa, 2012), books like these can serve education's goals as they are most likely to stimulate curiosity.

6. Books and technology

In the previous section, I have assumed that the knowledge that is worth knowing comes largely in the form of books. This assumption may seem outdated in a world where Twitter, Facebook and smartphones dominate most people's lives, and many can go months without so much as touching a paper book. In Thailand, only 4.4% of the population over 10 years old are regular book readers (Bangkok Post, 2013). Why, then, have I focused so much on the traditional, perhaps outdated, medium of books?

If we want students to grow intellectually and to become curious, we need to do more than ensure that students 'know' a lot of facts. Students need complex, deep organisational frameworks to structure their knowledge, and this means that they need to be exposed to complex, deep arguments rather than lists of facts. Creating and understanding such arguments takes time and many pages, and is much better done through the 300-odd pages of a typical book than the 4 or 5 paragraphs of a typical webpage (and it definitely cannot be achieved in the 140 characters of a tweet). Reading books allows contemplation and reflection, both essential for intellectual growth and original thought and both hindered by much technology (Wolf and Barzillai, 2009).

Arguing against the implementation of technology in education is highly unfashionable. After all, technological applications such as the Internet and Web 2.0 provide easy access to massive amounts of knowledge, allow students to disseminate their thoughts to a wide audience, and provide quick and easy communication with almost anyone. While I value these affordances, we also need to be wary of the indiscriminate application of technology in education for three reasons.

First, education is subject to fashions and fads. With the rapid rate of technological change, many current educational fads are technology-driven, as each new technological innovation is seen by adherents as the way to solve the crises in education. While some technologies do lead to beneficial educational change, it should be remembered that "it is pedagogy (and not technology) that drives the learning" (Lee, 2009: 1957). Blindly implementing technology-driven educational innovations without considering the learning benefits is a waste of time and resources.

Second, technological innovations often have downsides that are not fully considered. With the publication of Carr (2011), the negative effects of the Internet have become an issue of social concern. Despite its obvious benefits, the Internet can have serious consequences for attention and concentration. As Carr argues (with support from research), "the Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively" (p. 119) and "what the Net diminishes is … the ability to know, in depth, a subject for ourselves, to construct within our own minds the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence" (p. 143).

Third, any educational innovation necessarily replaces something that was done previously. Nearly all research into educational innovations focuses on the effects of the innovation and ignores what has been lost in replacing the previous practice. All the gains from easy access to knowledge from the Internet may be outweighed by the loss of deep concentrated contemplation afforded by the books that the Internet is replacing.

The ideology of academic rationalism with the goals of fostering intellectual growth and inculcating wisdom is far better served by the deep reading promoted by books than the often distracted browsing of knowledge on the Internet. If we want our students to have a broad

education and deep understanding, we need to be cautious in implementing technology-based educational innovations if these replace books.

7. Conclusion

This paper may seem to be the work of an out-of-date grumpy old man harking back to the halcyon days of his youth, but I believe that an education dominated by the economic efficiency ideology is headed in the wrong direction and shortchanging students. The dominance of economic efficiency did not come about because of a desire to improve education. Rather, it was driven by the sociopolitical change to postmodern capitalism. While education is part of the broader society and needs to reflect social changes, ultimately decisions about the direction of education should be made on the basis of what is best for students. Economic efficiency sees education as job training serving the needs of employers, but education should be more than that and also needs to serve the students and society. The performative basis of economic efficiency mean that teaching and learning focus on what can be measured, not what is of value both to students and society. Nebulous, intangible learning goals such as critical thinking, lifelong learning and wisdom are overlooked, and education does not lead to personal change. Education should stimulate curiosity, encourage reflection and foster intellectual growth, all goals of the ideology of academic rationalism. Knowledge should not be acquired purely because of its utility but for its own sake, and education should be an end in itself.

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