

Articles

LEARNING AND THE “CIRCUIT OF CULTURE”: A CULTURAL EXPLORATION AND REFLECTION ON THE UNIVERSITY AS A WORK SITE

Jennifer Kelly and Lorin Yochim

University of Alberta

Abstract

The purpose of this opinion piece is to explore a cultural practice at a university work site and its subsequent impact on higher education and adult learning. We use a cultural studies framework, particularly the “circuit of culture,” to interpret a single element of one university’s instructor evaluation program, the Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI), as a cultural text performed through processes of production, consumption, identity, regulation, and representation. While this program is specific to one site, we believe something similar can be found in colleges and universities across Canada and beyond. We also believe this paper is of particular interest to faculty engaged in the scholarship of adult education, embedded as it is in participatory traditions.

Résumé

Le but de ce texte d’opinion, c’est l’exploration d’une pratique culturelle dans un lieu de travail universitaire et son impact subséquent sur l’enseignement supérieur et sur l’éducation des adultes. Bien que cette exploration soit spécifique au lieu particulier, nous croyons quelque chose de semblable peut être trouvé dans les collèges et les universités partout au Canada et au-delà. Nous croyons également que ce document soit d’un intérêt particulier parmi des professeurs qui sont engagés à l’érudition de l’éducation des adultes, enracinée comme la dernière soit dans les traditions participatives.

Introduction

This paper is a critical inquiry into the cultural practices of a contemporary university, the University of Alberta (U of A)—practices that are broadly representative of many (but not all) colleges and universities in Canada. It does so by establishing that the university is a work site in which power is embedded through cultural practices within the institution.

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La Revue canadienne pour l’étude de l’éducation des adultes
24,1 November/novembre 2011 1–14*

ISSN 0835-4944 (print) ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L’Association canadienne pour l’étude de l’éducation des adultes

We use a cultural studies framework, specifically Johnson (1986) and du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus's (1997) "circuit of culture," to interpret a single element of one university's instructor evaluation program, the Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI), as a cultural text performed through processes of production, consumption, identity, regulation, and representation. In doing so, we demonstrate how members of the university community engage/are engaged in forms of learning that are neither neutral nor innocent. The problematic result of such learning is that many students, instructors, and others involved come to see the university as a purveyor of a valued commodity and, consequently, produce for themselves identities ("neo-liberal selves" [Davies & Petersen, 2005]) congruous with neo-liberal ideologies.

Such explication of meaning making and adult learning might also help theorists of higher and adult education understand how the production of meaning at work sites is not a neutral process, but one with cultural and ideological effects. Many academics working in higher education, including those engaged in the scholarship of adult education, are engaged in forms of learning that are political rather than neutral and that can dovetail seamlessly with neo-liberal ideology if accepted without challenge. This is particularly true for university administrators whose concern is to create evaluation-of-education tools without regard to cultural or political consequences.

This is particularly problematic when considering mature students or the teaching of adult education students, given that adult education scholars value student experience and insight as key components of their teaching. This paper will argue that USRIs are not linked to "good" adult education practice/teaching and that the connection between faculty evaluation of students (in a highly competitive neo-liberal university) and subsequent student evaluation of faculty does not promote a truly dialogic (Freire, 1970) adult learning environment. Many students of adult education have to be challenged to question deeply held convictions, beliefs, and values if they are going to be adult educators in the social purpose tradition of adult education (Collins, 1994; Welton, 2005); USRIs work against this outcome.

Theoretical Framework

Often invoked by both proponents ("I do Cultural Studies") and critics ("Don't accuse me of doing Cultural Studies") as though it were a unified discipline, cultural studies is better conceived of as a perspective that defies with impunity traditional disciplinary boundaries (Casella, 1999). Yet insofar as cultural studies amounts to a cohesive perspective, it remains a highly variegated and essentially contested one in terms of claims around its context of origin and issues of concern, as well as in the range of disciplines with which it has come to be associated (Casella, 1999). The variant of cultural studies most useful for this work is the early critical work of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) and adult educators Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart, in the United Kingdom. While such a variant has a closer affinity with the view of Antonio Gramsci and the neo-Marxian tradition of critique than with the poststructuralist mode many North American theorists took up in later years, we nevertheless applaud the work of theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, and Stuart Hall for their recognition of multiple perspectives and fluidity in identity formation. However, academics as cultural workers

are implicated in forms of learning that are inextricably linked to the establishment and perpetuation of relations of power. This requires a shift away from an uncritical perspective on teaching and recognition of education and learning as contextually problematic.

Circuits, Policies, and Practices

The contextual referent of this paper is the contemporary university, an institution that—and here we agree with a broad range of the present literature—has undergone radical transformation in neo-liberal times (see, for example, Davies & Petersen, 2005; Jones, 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Taylor, Barr, & Steele, 2002). Yet despite the negative effects that have accompanied these developments, Gary Hall (2004) argues that

[the] necessity of thinking about the university . . . is something that has frequently been overlooked within cultural studies . . . All too often such “theoretical” self-reflection is regarded as taking away from the *real* business of cultural studies . . . concerned with practical, material, political and economic issues in the world beyond the institution. (p. 1)

In other words, academics have tended not to critically examine their own workplaces as sites of power from a cultural perspective to the same degree that they have other workplaces that they investigate. The reasons for this failure are, without question, numerous and complex. Yet given the historical connection of cultural studies to adult education and, especially in the United Kingdom (Richard Hoggart, Edward Thompson, and Raymond Williams were all key figures in the establishment of cultural studies and all worked in extramural adult education departments of U.K. universities [see Steele, 1997]), the often contentious relationship between the state and the institutionalized form of cultural studies, it is nonetheless puzzling. Motivated thus, we want to examine a specific Canadian university as a work site in which policy—in this case USRI—produces specific cultural practices that, in the manner of a circuit, close back on the policy itself and, thus, work to maintain its existence.

Put differently, we aim to tease out other performative nodes of analysis via examination of the cultural. This is not to say we are not interested in the production of the policy—i.e., when and how it came into existence—but we also wish to distance ourselves from a position that leans toward a purely structural interpretation of USRI as a top-down, managerial strategy fashioned by an undifferentiated class of neo-liberal drones. Instead, as du Gay et al. (1997) argue, “rather than being seen as merely reflective of other processes—economic or political—culture is regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political processes . . . because all social practices are meaningful practices they are fundamentally cultural” (p. 2). Even though this circuit of culture is typically viewed as most useful to analyses of the production and consumption of media texts or concrete objects such as the Sony Walkman, we use it here to reconceptualize a policy tool—USRI—as a cultural text that is performed through processes of production, consumption, identity, regulation, and representation (du Gay et al., 1997; Johnson, 1986).

Where Richard Johnson’s (1986) model of the circuit identified only four aspects of cultural analysis—i.e., production, texts, readings, and lived cultures—du Gay et al. (1997) highlight those indicated above: production, consumption, identity, regulation, and

representation. These five moments of cultural practice structure the multi-perspective analysis that follows (Kellner, 1995). The challenge for the analyst who wishes to do so "is to grasp just how the moment of production inscribes itself in . . . without assuming that it can be 'read off' from economic relations" (Barker, 2002, p. 186). Further, the circuit allows the examination of the ways in which policy works through identities, representation, and consumption. Finally, it allows us to take up Raymond Williams' challenge that

there needs to be developed many different kinds of analysis which are in touch with each other . . . the least developed . . . is that which tries to understand precisely the production of certain conventions and modes of communication right inside the form. I would put this at the top of the list not because it could answer all the questions on the table, but because it's the least likely thing to happen. (Williams, Heath, & Skirrow, 1986, p. 14)

In this paper, then, we combine the study of the circulation of symbolic forms and meanings with an analysis of how power becomes embedded in institutions through cultural practices. Our central claim is that the expression of culture through the production, consumption, and representation of USRI is central to struggles over meaning, identity, and power, each of which are effective in the performance of policy. Such connections have been worked out at length by Stuart Hall (1997), who has written extensively about the political force of culture. Culture, that is, deploys power to shape identities and subjectivities within a circuit of practices that range from the production and distribution of goods, to representation, to a growing emphasis on regulation and consumption.

Analysis of USRI as a Cultural Object

Production

As many professors or students will confirm, student ratings of instructors have become a ubiquitous if not universal practice in the contemporary college and university (the uses such assessments are put to vary from institution to institution). Cahn (1994) holds that these ratings had humble beginnings as "amusing novelties" to help students select more interesting/useful/easy courses and/or instructors in the early 1960s (p. 38), yet studies on the subject date from as early as 1929 (see Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971, for a comprehensive review of the early literature). Whatever their origins or sources of emergence, ratings schemes have developed beyond these foundations to perform a central role in administrative decisions around hiring, promotion, tenure, and salary (Cahn). A large body of literature has grown up around these assessments, dealing with issues such as scope and purposes of use, reliability/validity, and efficacy/influence (see Costin et al.; Davies, Hirschberg, Lye, Johnston, & McDonald, 2007; Gage, 1961). For our purposes, however, the discursive production and circulation of meanings associated with instructor/course evaluations are the primary focuses.

The U of A is a large research-intensive institution in western Canada that aspires to increase its profile as such in both North America and the world (University of Alberta, 2006). While its research agenda is made well known through public statements and capital

commitments that are visibly prominent on campus, it maintains, on the surface at least, a commitment to “excellence in teaching” (University of Alberta, 2006, p. 5). Instructor ratings are billed as an important piece of this commitment. A visit to the university’s website allows one access to discourses on how the policy on USRI was initially produced and continues to be reproduced. USRI in its present form dates from 1993 and has since been modified periodically. According to the website, USRI came into being as an act of the U of A’s General Faculties Council: “the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* gives General Faculties Council (GFC) responsibility, subject to the authority of the Board of Governors, over ‘academic affairs’ (section 26(1))” (University of Alberta, 2007, section 5). While GFC has established a broader Teaching and Learning and Teaching Evaluation Policy (section 111), this paper is more narrowly concerned with two subsections: 111.2, Teaching Evaluation Policy, and, in particular, 111.3, Universal Student Ratings of Instruction. The stated rationale for the production of USRI can be traced via these same documents; further information on the policy is available on the university’s Academic Information & Communication Technologies webpage:

On October 12, 1993, the General Faculties Council (GFC) of the University of Alberta modified its policy concerning *Teaching Evaluation* and *Student Evaluation* of Instruction to include the requirement for collection of students’ ratings of instruction on a University-wide basis using a basic set of mandated questions. The policy also made provision for releasing the associated results to the Students’ Union and the Graduate Students’ Association. Currently, results are not made “public” unless there have been at least 10 completed questionnaires for a class. (University of Alberta, n.d.)

USRI is enacted through the administration of questionnaires. At the end of each course, students are asked to fill in a questionnaire related to the course content and the professor’s interactions with and attitudes toward them. The policy requires that the following statement be included on the questionnaire form:

The University would appreciate your careful completion of this questionnaire. The results help instructors and departments or faculties to initiate constructive change in curriculum and instruction. In addition the results are an important factor in decisions affecting the career of your instructor. The numerical summaries are available through the Students’ Union and the Graduate Students’ Association. (University of Alberta, 2007, section 111.3 C)

These questionnaires are compiled, analyzed, and scored according to a median and percentiles, and, finally, linked through both the university (<https://karl.srv.ualberta.ca/pls/webuser/pubreport.USRI>) and students’ union (<https://www.aict.ualberta.ca/units/client-services/tsqs/usri>) websites.

The significance of USRI and its associated policies is apparent here: “in its summative form, teaching evaluation forms a basis for rewarding excellence, as well as the basis for withholding reward” (University of Alberta, 2007, section 111.2.a). The university, in other words, is transparent in ascribing to USRI an evaluative function. A formative

function is also claimed: “evaluation provides helpful feedback to teachers by identifying teaching strengths and weaknesses and, in so doing, giving guidance for the improvement or refinement of teaching skills” (University of Alberta, 2007, section 111.2.b). Personal experience and discussions with fellow faculty members and course instructors suggest that its value to faculty, at least in terms of the contribution of USRI, is dubious at best. Therefore, while there is a claim to the development of faculty teaching skill, the reality is that results of USRI are seen by many faculty as essentially disposable. In the face of this, we would suggest that the evaluative function—the ascription of excellence for the purposes of university promotion; the awarding of salary and benefits—is the primary use to which the ratings are put.

In addition to information gleaned from the university’s website, a senior administrator revealed how the policy was produced and how it was perceived then and since. From these conversations, it seems that implementation of the policy was initially contentious, but that in recent years faculty have become acquiescent. Why might this be? What is it about policies such as USRI that leads to a shift in subjectivity? First, that the ratings are standardized is without doubt; the written policy indicates that all faculties shall ensure that the evaluation of all instructors and courses shall take place each time a course is offered. All faculty, in other words, are subjected to USRI each and every time they don the instructor’s mantle. Second, the rationale for the policy is linked with achieving excellence, a word that appears no fewer than four times in the university’s recent *Dare to Discover* “blueprint for greatness” (University of Alberta, 2006, p. 2), and an idea that at this specific historical conjuncture ties the institution’s policies into wider discursive formations aligned with neo-liberal ideology. As Mitchell (2003) puts it,

those pushing a neoliberal agenda in education stress . . . the necessity for greater . . . accountability and the imperative to create hierarchically conditioned, globally oriented state subjects—i.e. individuals oriented to excel in ever transforming situations of global competition, either as workers, managers or entrepreneurs. (p. 388)

Such policies, that is, do not simply manage or enforce accountability and excellence. Viewed as discourse, policies like USRI are implicated in

the construction of subjectivity within certain historical, social and cultural systems of knowledge in a society. Discourse produces a subject equally dependent upon the rules of the system of knowledge that produces it. In this respect discourse is both wider and more varied than either ideology or language, different subjects being produced by different discourse. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffen, 1998, p. 224)

Yet discourse does not originate in a vacuum. The idea of evaluating professors can also be read intertextually. An important impetus for the contemporary flourishing of instructor ratings was a discourse that formed during the 1960s and early 1970s. During these years, as an aspect of a radical anti-establishment discourse, university students argued for the ability to evaluate their professors and to challenge the traditional conceptions of valuable knowledge (see Arts and Science Students’ Union, n.d.; Lobenthal, 1969). So, ironically, what was at one point a progressive and even radical anti-establishment

challenge has been turned around to become part of a discourse that integrates seamlessly into a neo-liberal agenda. Such discursive migration indicates that discourses retain a degree of mobility within cultural circuits, what Bowles and Gintis call “transportable discourses” (in Swartz, 2003, p. 180). Yet, where Bowles and Gintis saw the transportation of political discourses around individual rights as an essentially positive development, in the present case seemingly harmless and even progressive calls for increased student voice and participation have been appropriated and recast as mechanisms of control (Swartz). We should not be surprised.

The experience of Reaganism in the United States and Thatcherism in the United Kingdom during the 1980s shows that “transportable discourses” do not always benefit the political left. Discourses of populism and democracy are not intrinsic to the political left but can be articulated for the benefit of the political right as well. (Swartz, p. 180)

Representation/Consumption

It can be argued that the social world does not exist *a priori* of discourses of representation; what is out there, in other words, is in part constituted by how it is represented (Hall, S., 1997). USRI is achieved through its representation in policies, but also in its consumption and representation as it is implemented in various sites. If signification involves one thing standing in for another, representation works not only by what is shown, revealed, or represented, but also by what is not given. We share conceptual maps and have access to a system of representation via language in order to construct meaning. Our analysis of USRI, then, is aligned less with the reflective or intentional approaches than with the constructivist perspective. In the latter, representation involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of things: the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world—the concepts we carry around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, that stand for or communicate these concepts (Hall, S., p. 61).

A critical aspect of USRI’s constitution is its representation in and through its constituent policies as an objective tool of evaluation. As already mentioned, USRI is most commonly applied as a questionnaire; the filling in of boxes and the reporting of results as averages and distributions suggest the removal of any emotional or subjective elements from the whole procedure. This process of representation articulates with other nodes in the circuit to produce meanings. So it is that consumption—of both USRI questionnaires and results—also works through representation; the representation of USRI as objective reinforces its consumption as such by department chairs and students. The questionnaires, now coded and tabulated as graphs, take on use value—*vis-à-vis* course selection and faculty rewards—as well as social value—in the form of non-monetary awards such as accrued status (Thompson, J., 1990).

As noted, the students’ union links to the results on the university’s website as well as to the Bear Tracks (<https://www.beartracks.ualberta.ca>) course registration system and program planner. Thus, students are encouraged to use the website to make course choices based on the information garnered through the USRI questionnaire. But despite the existence of a declaration that “small differences in evaluation should not be considered

as meaningful" (University of Alberta, n.d.) when using the evaluations to make course choices, a visit to the Bear Tracks course registration system cannot help but reinforce the link between course professor rating and the course body of knowledge.

This layering of one body of information (USRI) upon another (Bear Tracks) during the act of course selection reinforces the idea of education as a commodity: as the student becomes a consumer of educational products, registration is repositioned as an act of shopping for the educational experiences that are desired rather than required. After all, why waste time with sources of knowledge that may challenge one's existing experiences and/or beliefs? In general, these harder courses tend to attract lower student grades and subsequently lower student ratings.

Identities/Regulation

Within the circuit of culture, the concept of identities is concerned with the positionings we take on, i.e., the ways in which we position ourselves within the discourses constructed around USRI. The circulation of certain forms of knowledge within the discourse of education and USRI enables and even encourages the taking-up of specific types of subjects and selves. Power is exercised to subject faculty to the discursive binary of the "good" versus "bad" teacher. To be sure, degrees of goodness and badness are possible. But whatever variety is allowed for along such a continuum, the good/bad binary remains and thus fails to deal in any substantive way with the complexities of race, gender, or sexuality; or of hybridity; or of the messiness of educators who might well be competent in classroom techniques but challenging and going against the grain in terms of course content. As Vargas (1999) highlights, any instructor with traits deviating in some way from "normal" and/or whose experiences place her or him outside the group of normal faculty is likely to be perceived to some extent as "other" on a predominantly white campus (p. 364). Indeed, evaluation according to the categories deemed worthy by USRI works against the possibility of, for example, discomfort or confrontation as pedagogical strategies. We would suggest that the ability of the policy to maintain itself hinges on its effectiveness in producing teachers of types preferred by USRI ratings.

Here we see how the concept of articulation is useful in helping us understand the linking of the different nodes in the circuit of culture. By allowing for a temporary unity of disparate elements within the circuit—such as production with representation; representation with consumption; identities with regulation—we are able to see how separate processes work together to produce and reproduce USRI. Identities are produced through regulation; regulation, in turn, produces differing identities. So we can see that the meanings embedded at the moment of policy production cannot be assumed to be the sole outcomes of such a process, since such meanings can be worked at through other levels of the circuit, i.e., consumption, representation, regulation, and identities.

Publication—in the sense of "the making public"—of USRI is perhaps the most obvious indication of how regulation operates and articulates with wider neo-liberal discourses of choice. Such public discourses act as forms of regulation—they contour and condition the behaviour of professors who, if they are conscientious, take into account the comments of students and thereby regulate their understandings of what the process of

education is about. Students are also involved in the process of regulation as they come to see themselves as consumers and in many ways entitled to be the sole determiners of the type of education they receive. Commodity producer and consumer alike are identities thus produced through processes of regulation. From our different positions in the university as professor and now chair of the department, and as a graduate student nearing completion of a PhD, we have noticed that the tendency is what students want, students get; PowerPoint, WebCT, multimedia technologies of various kinds regardless of their educational value—placating students becomes an important criteria in USRI success. In both cases, what we are witnessing is the construction of a dominant subjectivity—the neo-liberal self. As Davies and Petersen (2005) state, such neo-liberal selves are necessarily flexible, multi-skilled, mobile, and able to change: “either they are flexible and adaptable, open to change, capable of finding new projects, and live in relative personal security, or they are not and will be put aside” (Chiapello & Fairclough in Davies & Petersen, p. 89). Regulation of the private sphere according to the norms of USRI both enables monologue and restricts dialogue; discursive communication, the essence of adult learning, is discouraged.

The policy, then, regulates our understanding of what knowledge is as well as how and in what forms it can be transmitted. The discourse of USRI articulates with an economic rationality so that what is clearly a subjective process (knowledge acquisition and adult learning) is transposed as something objective, quantifiable, and, therefore, accountable. This articulation and regulation of knowledge reinforces the idea that teaching is like any other commodity. Yet, as philosopher Lorraine Code (1996) reminds us, objectivity cannot be removed from questions of subjectivity and power: “ideal objectivity is a tacit generalization from the subjectivity of quite a small social group, albeit a group that has the power, prestige and security to believe that its experiences and normative ideals hold generally across the social order” (p. 197).

Such an analysis suggests that the production and reproduction of USRI is as much about performance of favoured identities as it is about subjugation to particular policy programs and directives. Thus, the power of department chairs and faculty evaluation committees vis-à-vis faculty is not one of rulers over ruled, as a one-dimensional view of power would suggest (Lukes, 2005). Rather, these individuals and governing bodies can be viewed as “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu, 1984), those who inscribe meaning into cultural texts such as USRI. They make USRI meaningful. For example, the annual review of performance and the tenure review of academics have become associated with the preferred cultural value of excellence, as have, to a certain extent, teaching awards. What follows is the seemingly endless accrual of rewards and status or, in Bourdieu’s terms, of cultural capital. Through this regulation, the whole process of USRI becomes primarily evaluative rather than diagnostic in terms of teaching, operating in a way similar to other policy harbingers of the neo-liberal age, such as the publication of league tables of public elementary and secondary school achievement and *Maclean’s* annual ratings of universities.

Discussion

We are not suggesting that students should be entirely removed from the process of evaluating their professors. It would be extremely arrogant, to say the least, to assume

that educators are infallible in terms of their teaching or that students are incapable of offering anything useful in this regard. Instead, the targets of our critique are the ways in which USRI is presented as neutral and objective and is used to position academics as good or bad, and consequently regulate their subject positioning in subtle yet destructive ways (Blackmore & Thompson, 2004). So, USRI, invested with significant summative authority, becomes part of the maturing professor's annual report and, consequently, his or her salary increment and future prospects. In the face of such immediate and future material consequences, it becomes beneficial for the young academic—never mind the old one—to not so much teach to the test—i.e., some accepted canon or body of work deemed vital—as to teach to the USRI (this discussion has focused on USRI at the U of A, but another circuit could be traced from the underfunding of universities, to increased student fees, to increased emphasis on student awards, to pressure to score high grades to gain those awards, to faculty grade escalation in support of students, and subsequently to a similar USRI process to identify easier courses and compliant professors, etc.).

One of the critiques of this form of creeping bureaucracy and its associated discourses of accountability and excellence—each of which tessellate so well with the embedded forms of neo-liberal ideology within universities—is that they take into account very little in terms of challenges associated with context and subject matter. Surely context, teacher/student identities and/or habitus, not to mention course content, must play a part in how USRI gets produced and reproduced as part of the pedagogical experience. If teaching, as Deborah Britzman (1991) argues, is about troubling the ways in which students think, is it not problematic to expect all teachers to score full points (i.e., a 5 on a 5-point scale) on a list of arbitrarily assigned indicators of good teaching? If teaching from a critical perspective means being reflexive and questioning one's own common-sense practices and ideas, it is unlikely that for students, and adult educators, classroom experiences will always be pleasurable. Not everyone gladly welcomes a challenge to their existing understandings of the world. Should the course instructor be held responsible when such inevitable antagonisms lead to unfavourable responses to statements such as "the instructor treated the students with respect" (University of Alberta, 2009)? It can be argued that what is actually being produced through USRI is not excellence, but "a discourse of liberal neutrality that abstracts the political from the realm of the cultural and social" (Giroux, 2000, p. 343). The whole process encourages a refusal to rethink the role academics might play in using the university (and adult education and public schooling in general) as a crucial public sphere for critical discourse as opposed to one in which hegemonic neo-liberal values are reinforced.

This active process, furthermore, is produced through difference and differentiation. In support of this hegemony thesis, Norman Fairclough (1995) argues that

Gramsci's concept of hegemony . . . is helpful here as a theory of power and domination which emphasizes power through achieving consent rather than coercion, and the importance of cultural aspects of domination depend upon a particular articulation of a plurality of practices. The issue with respect to a hegemony model becomes one of whether and how diverse discursive practices are articulated together within the order of discourse in ways which *overall* sustain relations of domination. (p. 55)

As an interpretive concept, ideology is also useful in understanding how USRI works through fragmentation to produce a specific hegemony. Using J. Thompson's (1990) orientation to ideology, we would adopt a position whereby

the interpretation of ideology is an interpretation of symbolic forms which seek to illuminate the interrelations of meaning and power, which seek to show how, in specific circumstances, the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms serves to nourish and sustain the possession and exercise of power. (p. 7)

Linking the two concepts offers the opportunity to analyze not just ideology, which produces effects in the name of specific power positionings, but also the process of that production through discourse analysis. Thus, one can regard ideology as an effect while discourse formation can be regarded as a process (Purvis & Hunt, 1993).

Conclusion

Highlighting as we have the concepts of hegemony and ideology unearths the problematic nature of discussing knowledge and learning as if all that we learn is in actuality socially beneficial, as if there are no historically located unequal relations of power. Popular concepts in contemporary educational discourse such as lifelong learning spring immediately to mind (see Chapter 6 of Taylor et al., 2002, for a discussion). We hold that examining the work site of adult and higher education scholars is important, particularly in the present as neo-liberal discourses seek to establish and maintain a hegemonic understanding of the workplace as a politically innocent space of learning, as a site that is so heterogeneous that it cannot be understood in terms of any coherent power structures. On the contrary, we maintain that learning does take place, but that it does so within institutions and organizations that have entrenched and durable aims and goals. We recognize, in other words, that academics working in university settings are learning certain "meaning(s) in the service of power" (Thompson, J., 1990, p. 7). Such forms of learning operate at the cultural level and are active within civil society, where the influence of ideas, within and external to institutions, work not through direct domination but by what Gramsci identifies as consent. Put more explicitly for the purposes of the present analysis, universities have competing political and economic agendas and goals. But they also operate within a larger context, one in which a specific economic system—i.e., free-market capitalism—represents a set of dominant goals and preferred subjectivities (see Thompson, E. P., 1971, for an early discussion of the impact of the corporatization of universities).

What is interesting about standardized evaluations such as USRI is how little discussion takes place about the context of institutions or the problematic nature of objectivity. A common-sense reading of USRI in the context of a neo-liberal market agenda holds that USRI is a fair and democratic way of achieving accountability and pursuing teaching excellence. A more critical stance, however, entails a different line of questioning: to what degree can USRI be taken as an objective, neutral, and harmless tool of evaluation? If it cannot be, should it be given weight beyond a specific teaching situation? Are the kinds of workplace learning that USRI engenders—and we have suggested above that for both instructors and students alike such learning is far more subtle and insidious than is

generally acknowledged—desirable in the short, medium, and long terms? If hegemony is won through struggle and, as J. Thompson (1990) holds, fragmentation is at the heart of successful maintenance of social order, then the society we see before us has come in part through the pervasive fragmentation of the social order and a proliferation of divisions between its members. And while fragmentation is not the only way in which social relations are (de)formed—J. Thompson also discusses processes of unification—it seems clear that, in the context of at least one contemporary university, USRI works through fragmentation articulated across processes concerning representation, identities, regulation, production, and consumption. If universities as sites of adult learning are to rediscover their critical liberal traditions, then

the historical experience of university adult education . . . has much to offer here. Education should, after all, be about opening intellectual doors, extending horizons, challenging assumptions and cultural and ideological beliefs; and about instilling both the spirit of rigorous intellectual enquiry and the humanistic and sceptical mindset. (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 162)

Scholars will have to recognize and challenge their institutions' own circuit of cultural practices that work against such possibilities.

Higher and adult education faculty need to question the processes and sociocultural institutional practices that frame their work to see if forces similar to those discussed in this paper are at play in their own institutions. No one would deny the possibility for agency by both students or faculty. However, it would be foolish also to deny the importance of actual workplace culture when examining work and learning at other work sites and, therefore, equally misleading to deny the force of the circuit of culture at our own.

References

- Arts and Science Students' Union. (n.d.). About ASU. Retrieved May 14, 2011 from <http://assu.sa.utoronto.ca/about>
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1998). *Key concepts in postcolonial studies*. London: Routledge.
- Barker, C. (2002). *Making sense of cultural studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Blackmore, J., & Thompson, P. (2004). Just 'good and bad news'? Disciplinary imaginaries of head teachers in Australian and English print media. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 301–320.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgment of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Britzman, D. (1991). Decentering discourses in teacher education: Or, the unleashing of popular things. *Journal of Education*, 173(3), 60–80.
- Cahn, S. M. (1994). *Saints and scamps: Ethics in academia* (Rev. ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Casella, R. (1999). What are we doing when we are "doing" cultural studies in education—and why? *Educational Theory*, 49(1), 107–123.

- Code, L. (1996). Taking subjectivity into account. In A. Garry & M. Pearsall (Eds.), *Women, knowledge and reality* (pp. 191–221). London: Routledge.
- Collins, M. (1994). *Adult education as vocation: A critical role for the adult educator*. New York: Routledge.
- Costin, F., Greenough, W. T., Menges, R. J. (1971). Student ratings of college teaching: Reliability, validity, and usefulness [Electronic version]. *Review of Educational Research*, 41(5), 511–535.
- Davies, B., & Petersen, E. B. (2005). Neo-liberal discourse in the academy: The forestalling of (collective) resistance. *LATISS – Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences*, 2(2), 77–98.
- Davies, M., Hirschberg, J., Lye, J., Johnston, C., & McDonald, I. (2007). Systematic influences on teaching evaluations: The case for caution. *Australian Economic Papers*, 46(1), 18–38.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. New York: Arnold.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gage, N. L. (1961). The appraisal of college teaching: An analysis of ends and means [Electronic version]. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 32(1), 17–22.
- du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Open University/Sage.
- Giroux, H. (2000). *Impure acts: The practical politics of cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, G. (2004). *Why you can't do cultural studies and be a Derridean: Cultural studies after Birmingham, the new social movements and the new left*. Retrieved May 8, 2009, from <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/5/30>
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
- Johnson, R. (1986). What is cultural studies anyway? *Social Text*, 16, 38–80.
- Jones, G. A. (2004). Ontario higher education reform, 1995–2003: From modest modifications to policy reform. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 34(3), 39–54.
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media culture, cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lobenthal, J. S., Jr. (1969). The catabolism of a student revolt [Electronic version]. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 40(9), 717–730.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mitchell, K. (2003). Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: From the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28(4), 387–403.
- Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313–345.
- Purvis, T., & Hunt, A. (1993). Discourse, ideology, discourse, ideology, discourse ideology . . . *British Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 473–499.
- Steele, T. (1997). *The emergence of cultural studies: Adult education, cultural politics, and the 'English' question*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

- Swartz, D. L. (2003). From correspondence to contradiction and change: Schooling in capitalist America revisited. *Sociological Forum*, 18(1), 167–186.
- Taylor, R., Barr, J., & Steele, T. (2002). *For a radical higher education: After postmodernism*. Buckingham, United Kingdom: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Thompson, E. P. (1971). *Warwick University Limited: Industry, management and the universities*. Harmondsworth, United Kingdom: Penguin.
- Thompson, J. (1990). *Ideology & culture*. London: Routledge.
- University of Alberta. (2006). *Dare to discover: A vision for a great university*. Retrieved May 7, 2009, from http://www.president.ualberta.ca/en/~media/University%20of%20Alberta/Administration/Office%20of%20the%20President/Documents/D2D/D2D_Vision_Document_2009c.pdf
- University of Alberta. (2007). *General faculties council policy manual*. Retrieved May 7, 2009, from <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/index.cfm>
- University of Alberta. (2009). USRI Reference Data. Retrieved May 7, 2009, from <https://www.aict.ualberta.ca/units/client-services/tsqs/usri/usri-reference-data>
- University of Alberta. (n.d.). *University student ratings of instruction (USRI)*. Retrieved May 7, 2009, from <http://www.ualberta.ca/CNS/TSQS/USRI.html>
- Vargas, L. (1999). When the "other" is the teacher: Implications of teacher diversity in higher education. *The Urban Review*, 31(4), 359–383.
- Welton, M. (2005). *Designing the just learning society: A critical inquiry*. Leicester, England: NIACE.
- Williams, R., Heath, S., & Skirrow, G. (1986). An interview with Raymond Williams. In T. Modleski (Ed.), *Studies in entertainment: Critical approaches to mass culture* (pp. 3–17). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.