



## RESEARCH PAPER

### **‘What’s in a name?’ Assessing dynamic tension between Critical Theory ambitions and Neoliberal pragmatism in Higher Education Disability service provision**

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The study examines the experience of a Higher Education Disability service provider as it battles the conflicting imperatives symbolised by a proposed name change for the service. One of the key dilemmas involved in the reflection of the practitioners involved is whether or not to include the word ‘Disability’ in the designation and the branding of the unit. Beyond the reflection of the name change itself, the data collected by the unit reveals the wider coexistence, within practices of service provision, of two distinct sets of values and imperatives. The paper analyses the thought process which took place on this campus for several months in 2013 and argues that what transpires in the analysis of the qualitative data surrounding this episode, is the growing dynamic interaction between a Critical Theory heritage and increasingly present Neoliberal imperatives. The outcomes section examines how this tension might be addressed in the future by Disability service providers but also campuses at large.

*Keywords:* disability; higher education; service provision; unit name; critical theory; neoliberalism

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### **Introduction**

Higher Education campuses in North America and Europe have traditionally taken a very critical stance towards neoliberalism imperatives which are being imposed on them, in the shape of new funding models and free market business processes (Marginson, 2007). Academics tend to see academic research and teaching as incompatible with neoliberal practices and ideals (Apple, 2001; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). It would be fair to say that a conceptual resistance to this model has grown over the last decade in post-secondary networks and is expressed without reserve (Steier, 2003). This is perhaps even more so the case in areas of student services and student affairs which have traditionally grounded their practices in critical theory work and associated their ideological stance with the defense and support of the marginalized and in need (Hursh, 2009).

Diversity offices, disability service providers, even financial aid offices, readily see their framework as one within which it is important to support and nurture the minority identities of their service users and to protect their interest against the ruthlessness of market based processes (Lipman, 2007). In many respects it would be fair to say that student services and student affairs personnel see university years, for the students they serve, as a temporary hiatus from market forces and real world capitalism and a window during which these young adults are free to discover and develop strong critical theory consciousness and identity (Leistyna, 2009). However, to what extent is this traditional conceptualisation still adequate, or even a valid reflection of the work undertaken by these services? Is it still fair to reject neoliberalism as a ‘dirty word’ when our campus practices have now long been shaped by this model? Is it still

appropriate to hold such negative views of the outcomes this model offers within higher education? Is it possible to pragmatically merge and blend both critical theory and neoliberalism within higher education service provision? This paper examines the reflection process a disability service provider faced relating to a practical decision regarding the name and format of its service provision; it analyses the qualitative data collected, through this brainstorming exercise, in order to highlight the progressive merging which the authors argue has occurred between critical theory objectives and neoliberal practices in the area of campus services.

## **Context**

The campus in question is a large North American campus of over 37,000 students. The disability service provider has a long history on this campus and has been in existence for over 20 years, with a substantial track record when it comes to traditional disabilities. The unit in question has struggled to adapt its proactive efforts and outreach to include non-visible disabilities; while the social model of disability had been explicitly embraced for several years on the unit's website and promotional documentation, its hands-on implementation had had little success (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999).

Strategic decisions were therefore taken in summer 2011, by management, to intensify efforts to implement the social model in campus practices, particularly through the development of universal design for learning (UDL) as a framework for inclusion (Burgstahler, 2008). As it moved in this direction, the unit began distancing itself progressively from medical model practices and terminology (Fovet, 2014); it began to recognize, in its daily practices and procedures, that disability is not an inherent characteristic of its users but rather the result of a lack of fit between their characteristics of students and the expectations of the environment (Barnes, Oliver & Barton, 2002).

Through this process, the service provider became increasingly concerned with a disparity between its theoretical adherence to the social model as a framework and its branding and visibility efforts, which were still classically packaged around traditional critical theory messaging focusing on the symbolic identity of marginalized individuals with disabilities. The very name of the unit, 'Office for students with Disabilities' came to symbolize this chasm between a politicized unit identity grounded in a traditional view of disability as identity forming, and practices and objectives that now identified disability as the product of environmental barriers and shifted the focus away from impairments. It became conceivable that the name and branding of the service might be abhorrent to potential users who might be reticent to use the unit because they did not identify as having a disability (Houghton & Fovet, 2012).

A year into this campus-wide social model implementation and UDL development, the unit decided to not just focus on social model awareness building on campus and in the classroom, but to also examine the possibility of rebranding its services using the social model lens, in order to align its messaging to users with its central theoretical principle.

This reflective re-examination was planned as a progressive, ongoing professional development exercise and it was decided that as much data as possible should be collected through this process in order to allow for an outcome analysis. The project was led by an intern from the School of Management. Hired as project lead for a period of two months, this student examined user expectations, reviewed branding practices in the field, carried out focus groups

and eventually produced a concluding report containing several rebranding options. These options all suggested a move away from the word disability as central marketing concept.

Would the unit change its name and move away from a medical model view of disability, thereby also breaking away from a long standing critical theory tradition of using and politicizing the word 'disability'? Or would it retain the word disability in its branding because of its critical theory relevance but risk alienating large numbers of possible users who might be reticent to approach a service using a branding with which they did not identify? Beyond the name change itself, the unit was becoming increasingly aware of the dichotomy it faced in its theoretical allegiance. Was the purpose of the unit to serve the greatest number of users and to embark on a neoliberal approach to service provision as a convenient vehicle for such a mandate? Or did it feel it had to dedicate itself to a critical theory view of its role and reject the neoliberal business model focus on customer needs and market forces, to instead develop a disability voice on campus, grounded in a critical theory rejection of 'mainstreaming'?

## Literature Review

The stakes are high in such a process, even if the decision only relates to a unit name. Disability is word that has long been reclaimed as a tool of empowerment by the critical theory movement (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). Like many marginalizing terms it has been politically re-owned by activists, with a view to facilitating the creation of radical identities and to claiming shared power and decision making, particularly in relation to one's own destiny (Leistyna, 2009). In this sense it has unifying political value and relevance in connecting individuals who might otherwise feel marginalized and oppressed, and in offering global momentum and voice to a group which would be left unnoticed and discarded as a minority without it. Critical theory highlights the fact that groups such as people with disabilities are inherently doomed, within a neoliberal framework such as the one we inhabit, to be discarded as politically and financially irrelevant, because they carry no force within the markets due to their status and underrepresentation (Tyson, 2006).

Yet the neoliberal theoretical framework and the business model approach to service provision are not entirely detrimental to users of disability service providers at this present conjuncture. The application of neoliberal principles to student services and student affairs has led to the adoption of a customer service approach to the needs of the users, and to increased sensitivity to the students' motivations and needs (Harvey, 2005). It is precisely the realization that students are now customers that has allowed a holistic service delivery format in the contemporary campus to emerge (Tinto, 2005).

In the Disability field particularly, work around customer service, and a personalized and holistic approach to service provision has led to the removal of what many users describe as 'barriers' (Beck, Diaz del Castillo, Fovet, Mole & Noga, 2014). Units over-focusing on 'Disability' as terminology, also tend to not question the requirements for extensive medical documentation as gate keeping process within service provision. Yet if social model theory is increasingly convincing in demonstrating that, for many, it is the environment, and more particularly the classroom and teaching styles, that create disabling situations, not the impairment itself (Houghton & Fovet, 2012). Many of these students will not identify as having a disability and may therefore be reticent to use services which brand themselves under a traditional critical theory lens. This is particularly true of student experiencing mental health issues (Fovet, 2014b).

This has up to now left higher education disability service providers in an uncomfortable degree of tension between two poles between which it seems difficult to function cohesively.

Indeed the literature on the clash between the critical theory and the neoliberal models in higher education has, up to this point, been categorical that the two systems are mutually exclusive and non-compatible (Dill, 2003). Because critical theory sees disability as a minority discourse, its main allegation is that individuals who identify with this identity are de facto marginalized and fail to gain status or decision making power within environments that are ruled by market forces (Giroux, 2004). Neoliberal theorists on the other hand see market forces as dynamic tools that will lead to the acknowledgement of user or customer aspirations and to spontaneous metamorphosis of environments through this demand and supply process. It would argue therefore that educational environments will become more inclusive because the students as users require this change to occur without the need for them to forge a politicized minority identity (Steier, 2003; Marginson, 2007).

### **Methodological Reflection**

The working hypothesis of this data collection exercise was that higher education service units, such as this Disability service provider, were increasingly able to merge critical theory ambitions with neoliberal terrain practices.

The data compiled for this study is qualitative and was collected both from users and unit staff. The data collected from students emerged from the regular quality assessment exercises that are scheduled through the year, including a global online directive survey, as well as the formal consultation which is institutionalized between the unit and its student advisory committee. Several student interns have also collaborated on projects with the unit, over this period, and offered their detailed feedback.

Data collected from staff was obtained through scheduled staff meetings, HR reviews and key strategic get together sessions, such as the annual retreat, professional development debriefing exercises and brainstorming around quality assurance.

Significant efforts were made to address researcher-participant power dynamics and to limit situations where the participants would have felt pressured to answer in any particular fashion. Perfect collaborative research however clearly remains a working ideal rather than a fully achievable goal. Ethical steps were taken to ensure that participants could contribute freely to discussions on outcome and impact on services, without feeling that dynamics of power or authority came in the way. The research collaboration included student advocates, liaison individuals from other campus units, as well as unit staff members.

The global context of the project is action research in the sense that the researchers were also professionals of the unit who collaboratively examined the impact of policy change and branding modification (Reason, 2003). The staff members were also engaged participants: more than mere actors, they had an interest in examining the transactional results of the exercise in order to improve their practice and user satisfaction (Wright & Marquez, 2006).

### **Findings**

The review of name and branding practices led by the student project lead was a smooth two months process and materialized rapidly into a variety of conceptual options for consideration. Focus groups led by the project lead, with users of the service, quickly settled on a

rebranding choice which appears as Annex A. It involved the removal of the word 'Disability' from the name of the service. The feedback from participants in the focus group indicated that the 'my' part of the logo had been chosen because they indicated a desire to provide personalized and holistic service provision, while the 'access' part of the new name would suggest a focus on the environment and not the impairment. The outcome and end product confirmed the staff's intuitive assumption that the word 'disability' acted as a deterrent with potential users, rather than as an appeal.

The entire user base of the unit – some 1600 students - was surveyed electronically in March 2014, as part as its annual quality assurance (QA) exercise and over 80% of users felt satisfied, to extremely satisfied, with the name change. This confirmed not only that students felt a move away from a minority discourse identity was necessary for this unit, but also that they felt comfortable being surveyed and drawn in this process through means that are neoliberal in their essence: large scale surveying, focus groups, QA monitoring, application of efficiency standards in service provision and an implicit acknowledgment that majority user feedback is the way to transform services.

The staff of the unit reported feeling relieved that they were allowed to move dynamically out of a zone of tension and unease where they were aware of working with two discourses in conflict. They felt almost unanimously that the process and the student's validation of it, freed them from a strong adherence to critical theory within their work, which was historical and traditional, rather than reflective. They felt as through this move towards large scale consultation and rebranding would improve the efficiency of service provision by drawing in a wider user base and clarifying the nature of the service vis-à-vis potential user expectations.

Yet staff of the unit felt equally relieved to now be able to apply their sensitivity, awareness and knowledge of critical theory to specific disability visibility events on the campus, while now reassured it no longer amounted to a deterrent for service users in their daily practices. This was notably the case with the Disability Awareness Week, as well as several high level public lectures in Disability Studies. Two of these staff members also presented papers at Disability Studies conferences where they analyzed their own reflective process with regards to the tension they originally felt between both theoretical models and the positive outcomes the name change brought to their practice (Giles, 2014; Fovet, 2014c)

## **Outcomes**

The outcomes of this study are important for they demonstrate, from a practical dimension and perspective, the tangible reality of the impasse many areas of academia are facing by continuing to see critical theory and neoliberalism as mutually exclusive. It is argued by the authors that, beyond individual political opinions and beliefs, the time has come to examine to what extent one agenda can serve the other and vice versa- even if the literature currently argues this is an impossibility. In this practical example, there existed a very real risk that potential users of a service might be drawn away from this source of support, simply because of the field's historical adherence to a critical theory discourse. Few will argue furthermore that, in this context, neoliberal tools - such as user surveys, focus groups, branding and marketing - have led to wider access to resources for students in need. A neoliberal philosophy has led to service transformation, and to eventually an improved user experience and greater accessibility of the resources. The tools of the majority have ended up serving, very adequately, the aspiration of the minority.

The very notion of minority may, as a matter of fact, need to be rethought in the contemporary post-secondary context. Most campus administrations in North America are indeed only too aware of the paradigm shift which has recently transformed the higher education landscape. Even the most renowned research universities can no longer hope to attract and retain sufficient numbers of students without addressing their needs and expectations proactively (Pomerantz, 2006). In the field of Disability for example, this is an auspicious time to integrate Universal Design for Learning into a wider diversity drive which is becoming crucial to guarantee applications, retention and graduation rates in line with campus objectives and governmental expectations. The neoliberal agenda, which has long promoted research activities, which themselves attracted wider funding, as the prior focus of higher education institutions, has now come full circle and is tangibly and explicitly focusing on diverse student needs as a priority, and as the key element to long term survival and sustainable growth (Tinto, 2005; Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). It appears crucial for Disability service providers to take advantage of this auspicious development to better serve the needs of their clientele (Strange & Banning, 2001).

What emerges as a new objective from the experience described in this study, is the need to transform staff training so as to make employees in the post-secondary sector less defensive of using neoliberal tools for social justice objectives. It will become increasingly important to support staff members as they move out of a zone of unease between two apparently conflicting frameworks, to new breaking grounds where they feel they are aware of the critical tension that exists between the models but feel empowered to use this tension in constructive ways towards campus transformation and the implementation of widening participation objectives (Ferguson, 2010).

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## Annex A

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of its services to students....*

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*Your access preoccupations,  
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myACCESS

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