Recognition, Trust, and Reliance: some considerations on authority, leadership, and power in higher education

Dr Morgan White
Homerton College
morganelliswhite@hotmail.com
The highest good, is not life, but the world. Hannah Arendt warned us over fifty years ago that the concept of authority had almost lost its meaning under attack both from the left, where it was confused with tyranny, and from the right, where it was confused with unfreedom (Arendt, 1993b). The concept of authority is irreducibly political. I want to explore the concept of authority in education because I think we need to get clearer just how important education is for democracy. Authority is grounded in the notion of moral tradition (Arendt, 1993a) rather than orderliness, or some vague promise about improved employment prospects for those who do as they are told. Arendt, in fact, connects her conception of authority as auctoritas – making the world, creating the possibility of action, with a sharp critique of so-called child-centred education in ‘The Crisis of Education’ (Arendt, 1993a). In higher education contexts where students are encouraged to consider themselves consumers of positional goods, we tend to get the same abdication of educational responsibility for the world that she saw in a child-centred, responsibility-abdicating, school education in the 1950s. This paper looks towards the context of education, and specifically examines higher education in England, to draw out the relationship between authority, trust and reliance and distinguish the state from polis.

Authority demands obedience, so it is not surprising that the concept is confused with lack of freedom, or with power or violence. But authority is not concerned with external means of coercion; rather it is recognized. As Arendt says, ‘where force is used, authority itself has failed’ (Arendt, 1993b, p. 93). But neither is authority concerned with persuasion because persuasion ‘presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation’ (Arendt, 1993b, p. 93). So, authority involves obedience but neither force nor persuasion.

Authority, in political thought, fits the category of what William Gallie called an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1956). There are various ways in which political philosophers have attempted to ground the concept of state authority: through security (Hobbes); by consent (Locke); participation in democratic will formation (Rousseau); appeal to fairness that all reasonable subjects agree to (Rawls). These are only some well-known varieties of how political authority is grounded in the question of political obligation. For some, such as Robert Paul Wolff, authority cannot be grounded at all, since it always and everywhere limits autonomy (Wolff, 1998, p. 18). Indeed, Wolff says, elsewhere, that ‘Claims to authority, the exercise of authority, and the submission to authority have no place whatsoever in any of the characteristic educational relationships of a university’ (Wolff, 1969, p. 100).

It is tempting to agree, when we think in terms of education, perhaps a higher education most of all, to think in terms of the development of autonomy, rather than in terms of authority. This becomes all the more obvious when Wolff tells us that ‘Authority is the right to command, and correlative, the right to be obeyed’ (Wolff, 1998, p. 4). Of course, when we construe authority in Wolff’s deontic terms of issuing commands or imperatives in return for obedience, it appears to us as an entirely inappropriate concept with which to view pedagogic relationships, especially (perhaps) in an environment where students are highly indebted through tuition fees which they incur in return for the possibility of higher earnings after graduation. Wolff defines authority in terms of command which he can dismiss as immoral if it is never legitimate for an autonomous person to command another, but autonomy and authority are not antonymous. Wolff is quick to draw a common distinction between de facto and de jure authority, and proposes that the fundamental task of political philosophy is to give a deduction of the concept of legitimate authority:

To complete this deduction, it is not enough to show that there are circumstances in
which men have an obligation to do what the *de facto* authorities command. Even under the most unjust of governments there are frequently good reasons for obedience rather than defiance….[A] man may be right to comply with the commands of the government under whose *de facto* authority he finds himself. But none of this settles the matter of legitimate authority. That is a matter of the *right* to command, and of the correlative obligation to obey the person who issues the command… Obedience is not a matter of doing what someone tells you to do. It is a matter of doing what he tells you to do because he tells you to do it. Legitimate, or *de jure*, authority thus concerns the grounds and sources of moral obligation (Wolff, 1998, p. 9).

Wolff’s defence of philosophical anarchism, and his dismissal of the exercise of authority in the educational relationships in a university, are only as good as the terms in which he seeks to define authority. Wolff’s theory of authority falls into the tradition of the command theory of law, which includes Hobbes, Austin, and Kelsen, but the idea that authority concerns only commands and obedience misleads us. As Golstone and Tunnell explain:

It is wrong to define “authority” as “the right to command A to (not) do x,” because commanding is only one type of activity that authorities engage in, and not the essence of authority. Not only do authorities decide that A will do x, they decide or rule or judge that something is the case. An umpire in a baseball game, for example, may issue commands, but he also decides or rules that a pitch is a ball, or that a base runner is out. If he says that a base runner is out, then the base runner is out; the umpire’s decision makes it so. When a spelling-bee judge declares a word to be spelled (in)correctly, then his decision is binding, even though he is mistaken. (His decision might be appealed, of course.) When a judge renders a verdict, which is clearly an exercise of authority, he is not giving commands, rather he is announcing his decision. When a judge pronounces sentence, he is doing just that, not commanding anyone to do anything. But when the judge tells the bailiff, “Take him away,” then he is commanding. Although both announcing decisions and commanding may initiate action, nonetheless announcing decisions must be distinguished from commanding A to (not) do x. The definition of “authority” as “the right to command” assimilates diverse modes of authority to one - namely, commanding (Goldstone and Tunnell, 1975, p. 134).

Wolff’s *de jure* concept of authority allows him to express his argument in terms of command and obedience, which are unlikely to appeal to teachers interested in cultivating attitudes and persons who would want to pursue a higher education. The authoritative tutor is not someone who commands obedient students in the seminar. Rather, the authoritative academic cultivates an authoritative relationship of trust with students. Just as an umpire or judge has authority to make decisions (and sometimes might issue commands), an academic or teacher has authority to organize a course of study, holds a right to award grades, and a right to establish and apply a system of standards (Silk, 1976, p. 273). But the academic does not hold this authority in her person, it is not the experience she has, her personal qualities, or her academic qualifications, which bring this authority. The authority of the academic ought not to be considered in causal terms which the command theory invites: your command causes my obedience. Rather, as Peter Winch pointed out, ‘Authority is not a sort of influence…but an *internal* relation. The very notion of a human will, capable of deliberating and making decisions, presupposes the notion of authority’ (Winch, 1967, p. 98). This is an interesting turn of phrase, because Winch is pointing out that participating ‘in rule-governed activities *is*, in a certain way, to accept authority’ (Winch, 1967, p. 99). The academic
belongs to a particular culture. Or, as Michael Oakeshott puts it, the academic belongs to a certain manner of thinking and employs a particular language. Oakeshott draws a distinction between a text and a language in education, and these overlap to some degree with a vocational and a university education, respectively. It is Oakeshott’s view that a vocational education concerns not how to use a particular language, but ‘how to use those products of…thought which contribute to our current manner of living’ (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 192). Consider how far removed Oakeshott’s understanding of a university is from the perspective of an undergraduate student keen to acquire a university qualification which will maximize future income. Oakeshott says that a university

is an association of persons, locally situated, engaged in caring for and attending to the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization. It is concerned not merely to keep an intellectual inheritance intact, but to be continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping, reorganizing, making more intelligible, reissuing and reinvesting. In principle, it works undistracted by practical concerns; its current directions of interest are not determined by any but academic considerations; the interest it earns is all reinvested (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 194).

The student envisaged by our present higher education policies has little interest in attending to the intellectual capital that makes a civilization, and little care for any interest it earns in being reinvested. The academic authority of the educator rests on what Max Weber termed the traditional authority of the ‘cultivated man’, rather than the rational-legal credentials of the expert:

Behind all the present discussions of the foundations of the educational system, the struggle of the ‘specialist type of man’ against the older type of ‘cultivated man’ is hidden at some decisive point. This fight is determined by the irresistibly expanding bureaucratization of all public and private relations of authority and by the ever-increasing importance of expert and specialized knowledge (Weber, 1991, p. 243).

The academic educator holds a sense of deriving authority from the intellectual discipline, the manner of thinking she seeks to introduce to her students. Her students, on the other hand, seek the expertise that brings increased employability in the labour market, while senior administrators and policy-makers involved in the development of the concept of student partnership hold fast to a belief in leadership, which (I tentatively suggest) is actually the name we give to relations of power that ought to be authoritative. The teacher and the student hold different understandings of commitment to one another within the context of a privatized, marketized English higher education. The student believes in a functionally relevant higher education experience (providing opportunities to develop skills and understanding) yet cannot rely on academic authority to fulfil commitment to the student given the low status of teaching, the weight of student numbers and, most importantly, the student’s private, understanding of the self in everyday life. The relevance of the world is lost on universities and students thinking in careerist terms.

Roger Brown, a British higher education policy analyst who is highly critical of marketization, describes higher education, not as a ‘search good’ where value can be determined prior to consumption, nor as an ‘experience good’ where value is determined as the good is consumed, but as a ‘post-experience good’:
Higher education is actually a “post-experience good”, the effects of which may not appear for many years and may not even be traceable to a particular educational experience…. Because higher education is an intangible product, and because it involves a judgement-based, customized solution, as in any professional service, it is not always clear to either the teacher or the student what the outcome will be (Brown, 2011, p. 24).

Brown points out that this characteristic feature of the good of higher education renders problematic quality indicators in the marketplace, designed to act as proxies for price signals. Individual students cannot value education as they ‘consume’ it because of epistemic asymmetry between even good students and good teachers. The analytical path down which discussion of the economics of information leads encourages us to conceive of higher education in a particularly shallow manner. There seem to be two problems with this. First, higher education’s value is regarded primarily in private, individualistic terms. Second, higher education’s value is construed in epistemic terms. A good higher education provides practical and propositional knowledge to the individual. This knowledge yields increased productivity. Spending on higher education (by the state or by individuals) is rationalised in instrumental terms. State policies are intended to release or encourage that instrumental value as economies ‘upskill’. When we regard education as ‘adding value’ to persons, we miss a fundamentally important moral role that education takes on. Teachers, colleges, and universities play a vital role in identifying students with talent and potential. The students’ grades are a reflection of educators’ judgements about the students. Students, their families, their future employers are put in a position of trust towards the educators’ judgements – the authority of teachers’ judgements is at stake, but this authority does not have the status of a command. Or, consider the possibility that higher education is about supporting the public sphere. Universities’ first duty is to the public and developing competent persons capable of acting in the public sphere (Smith, 2010). The democratic state in this context should trust universities to carry out this role.

In the UK, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has advocated a policy of ‘student partnership’. On this view, students should be ‘collaborators’ in institutional structures and processes relating to teaching and assessment and ‘central contributors to the business of enhancing the student experience’. Students are regarded as part of a community of learners working with academics ‘sharing responsibility’ to enhance teaching, assure quality and maintain standards.

The rationale for this partnership model is primarily market-driven. On the one hand, student partnership will help entrench future UK competitiveness by consolidating a special feature of the UK ‘brand’ that is encapsulated in the phrase ‘intimacy of pedagogical relationships’. On the other hand, partnership counters any notion of students as passive consumers of their education. The logic of student partnership can also be seen in a recent Business, Innovation & Skills report on Improving the Student Learning Experience – a national assessment (BIS, 2014). The report attempts to track student satisfaction over the previous two years and pays particular attention to the mechanisms used to gauge student satisfaction with institutions’ attempts at ‘student engagement’ in terms of representation in matters of governance, feedback from students, their ability to shape their academic experience, and to what extent students can see the impact of their feedback (BIS, 2014).

An understanding of expert authority of the teacher is negated under student partnership. It is not that students should not be involved in educational matters or have a voice. Rather, the claim here is that undermining the authority of the teacher to limit the
impact of a consumer model of higher education is detrimental to both student and teacher when it comes to the main task of a higher education – learning and specializing in a subject discipline of choice in a way that attends to the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization, as Oakeshott would put it.

Advocates of the market often point towards a particular form of market failure caused by asymmetrical information. Akerlof (1970) sets out the problem related to markets where the quality of the good on offer is subject to uncertainty on the part of potential consumers. Akerlof explains that there are many sorts of market where buyers use some sort of market statistic to judge the quality of prospective purchases. This generates ‘incentive for sellers to market poor quality merchandise since the returns for good quality accrue mainly to the entire group whose statistic is affected rather than to the individual seller. As a result there tends to be a reduction in the average quality of goods and also in the size of the market’ (Akerlof, 1970, p. 488). Epistemic asymmetry of information in the market, between buyers and sellers (but also what we might consider a moral asymmetry between well-intentioned and malicious buyers and sellers) causes the market to degrade and eventually shrink as bad quality merchandise crowds out good quality offerings. Roger Brown’s wish to identify higher education as a post-experience good is in part a recognition that education, as a relational good, is highly differentiated between different individuals undergoing different experiences with different effects at different points over the course of a lifetime. For Brown, a higher education is a process, or an event which kick-starts an ongoing process.

In the economics of information, post-experience goods are also sometimes referred to as ‘credence goods’ (Darby and Karni, 1973). Dulleck, Kerschbamer and Sutter explain that:

Repair services, medical treatments, the provision of software programs, or a taxi ride in an unknown city are prime examples of what is known as a credence good in the economics literature. Generally speaking, credence goods have the characteristic that though consumers can observe the utility they derive from the good ex post, they cannot judge whether the type or quality of the good they have received is the ex ante needed one. Moreover, consumers may even ex post be unable to observe which type or quality they actually received. An expert seller, however, is able to identify the type or quality that fits a consumer’s needs by performing a diagnosis. He can then provide the right quality and charge for it, or he can exploit the information asymmetry by defrauding the consumer (Dulleck, Kerschbamer and Sutter, 2011, p. 526).

The notion of a credence good adds another dimension to the concept of the post-experience good. If the consumer of a higher education can roughly estimate the utility of that higher education, she may still struggle to grasp whether that higher education was what she needed before she began to study. Moreover, she may well be unsure of the quality of her higher education even at the end of life. A decision to consume a credence good, whether it’s related to expert health care, car repairs, a taxi journey in an unfamiliar city, or a higher education, involves trust or some sort of reliance. The university student and the motorist with a car that will not start both place themselves in a position where they must trust or rely upon a potentially fraudulent provider. There are different sorts of credence goods. Sometimes credibility relates mainly to the functional aspects of a good and involves the recipient of the good relying on it to function appropriately. At other times, however, credibility relates mainly to trust and a moral commitment between the consumer and producer. To be sure, at the empirical level, credence goods involve both moral trust and reliability. However,
keeping these analytically distinct throws into relief the altered grounds of authority and power in relations between academics and students.

Fair trade coffee or organic pork products carry a ‘kite mark’. The kite mark represents a set of standards involved in the production of the good through a vertical supply chain. The consumer of the credenence good trusts in the meaning of the kite mark, and the observation of standards set by the authority of the institution represented by the kite mark. The university might be considered in a similar way. The authority of the university is delegated by some higher authority such as the Pope, historically, or the state, for instance via the Privy Council in Britain.

Zdenko Kodelja argues that authority involves trust. This is implicit in Arendt’s conception of authority – an idea, that we have almost lost sight of. Authority, on a standard analysis, takes two forms: epistemic and deontic authority, also sometimes expressed as ‘an authority’ and ‘in authority’. R.S. Peters argued that epistemic authority, being an authority, grounds deontic authority, being in an authoritative position to issue imperatives.

Usually we think that what makes professors epistemic authorities is their de facto knowledge. But this knowledge itself is not sufficient for being an epistemic authority or, more precisely, for being a de facto epistemic authority as De George interprets it. In his opinion, “we make someone a de facto authority by believing what [the person] says.” Therefore, a university professor is for students a de facto epistemic authority if, and only if, they believe — at least to some extent — “what [the professor] says when [he or she] teaches. If there is no such” student, “then no matter how” knowledgeable the professor is, he or she “is not a de facto epistemic authority.” Thus, what makes the professor a de facto epistemic authority is not his or her knowledge, but rather the students’ belief. However, they would not believe if they knew that the professor did not have the knowledge they supposed. (Kodelja, 2013, p. 323).

In other words, the university teacher’s authority over students rests upon recognition of that authority by those students. The teacher holds authority, in other words, to the extent that she is trusted by the student. The relationship between authority and trust is familiar to readers of Locke’s liberal social contract theory. According to Locke, in society the overarching good is the common good, but the uncertainty involved in political life can sometimes means that political authority fails to sustain the common good. Locke turns to the notion of fiduciary trust as a model for ruling. Here citizens should remain vigilant towards those they trust in authority. Emily Nacol says, of Locke’s liberal idea of trust, that

The trust model is appropriately open and flexible, but this elasticity contains the potential both for profitable political relations and for profound betrayal. That is, a trust can be either a means of security and benefit or a source of insecurity and loss; it always holds the seeds of both, as risks do (Nacol, 2011, p. 581).

Citizens take on a role whereby they are required to exercise judgement over whether their trust is being honoured by the trustee state. At the heart of Locke’s social contract lies the risk: agents in the state of nature enter into an agreement to give up their natural rights in exchange for civil rights on the understanding that the government will support the common good. The source of the authority of the state is therefore the will of trusting, consenting citizens, but their trust and consent is always and everywhere provisional. Locke’s citizens effectively trust the state with property and the right to exert punishment, but this is risky because the citizens cannot be sure they are not escaping polecats and foxes only to deliver
themselves into the mouths of lions. The legislative authority of the state is more likely to be recognised where the state enables (rather than disables) citizens to act as competent judges.

Trust and authority have generally declined as risk management has been incorporated into a bureaucratic ethic associated with the modern office. It should come as no surprise that talk of obedience problems and discipline in primary school classrooms has risen as the authority of teachers, lecturers and academics has become transformed into a bureaucratic system. Gradually, education is losing its moral dimension.

Trust, Katherine Hawley argues, is a moral quality, more than mere reliance. Trust involves commitments and promises. When trust fails, betrayal is involved. Hawley finds it analytically helpful to examine the concept of trust in opposition to distrust and non-reliance. An increasingly transactional relation between students, teachers and universities could be argued to have altered relations in terms of trust and authority. In effect, new arrangements for higher education finance (such as £9,000 annual tuition fees in England) generate a situation where trust becomes distrust, and academic authority becomes a service provider. The imposition of high-level fees radically alters academic relations. The credence good is no longer imbued with credibility, trust in the good begins to evaporate. This is because the social rules and conventions involved in the interpretation of what it means to study at a university are altered – the normative grounds are altered. Universities generate, for instance, expectations that students (as consumers should expect to rely upon). The shift from trust to reliance undermines legitimate authority, or possibly, for some (students and academics), brings a sense of betrayal. A predominant policy response to this situation is to encourage universities to engage in practices which increase ‘student partnership’. However, this partnership takes place at a formal policy level rather than organically embedded into the meaning of belonging to the university as a student. Hawley argues that distrust ‘is nonreliance plus a tendency to resentment, a tendency to judge the distrustee negatively, or tendency to think that an apology is warranted: distrust is something like disappointed trust, though perhaps not preceded by an episode of trust’ (Hawley, 2014, p. 9). For Hawley, it is ‘appropriate to trust or distrust someone to do something only if that person has an explicit or implicit commitment to doing it’ (Hawley, 2014, p. 9). This means that trust involves reliance and some extra sense of commitment. Often, this extra sense of commitment is thought to be some positive view of the motives of the trusted. If I trust you to teach me Locke’s theory of just property acquisition I might assume you have the right sort of motive for teaching me Locke. This might be your intellectual interest in Lockean political philosophy. Russell Hardin, for instance, suggests that when we trust someone, we expect the trustee to take on our interests within his own. The student expects and trusts his teacher to look out for the student’s interest, while the same student might rely on his laptop to store essays and readings. There is no expectation that the laptop has intentions which take into account the student’s interests. Karen Jones, on the other hand, has argued that trust requires an attitude of optimism or hope, an affective attitude rather than a belief, that the trusted will be positively moved by the thought she is being trusted (Hawley, 2014, p. 5). But Hawley is keen to demonstrate that such a motive-based idea of trust cannot explain distrust.

Hawley argues that the appropriateness of relations of trust or distrust hinges on an explicit or implicit commitment between the truster and the trustee.

To trust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and to rely on her to meet that commitment. To distrust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and yet not rely upon her to meet that commitment (Hawley, 2014, p. 10).
The problem of the university teacher’s authority turns on the teacher’s commitment and purposes, and the student’s expectations and understanding of that commitment. It is likely that the university teacher understands her commitment in epistemic terms or in terms of attitude towards developing a sense of intellectual curiosity. The student, however, is encouraged by higher education policies and practices to understand the university teacher’s commitment on a different horizon of skill development in preparation for paid employment. The bureaucratic manager is keen to understand the academic’s commitment in terms of targets, various league table positions, and research evaluation scores.

In a focus on relations between teachers and students we should notice that the student who distrusts his teacher might distrust a particular attitude in his teacher: ‘Perhaps’, she writes, ‘expecting the distrustee to have an interest in frustrating our interests’ (Hawley, 2014, p. 6). But, Hawley points out, such negative expectations are not necessary for distrust: we would distrust a liar or a cheat even if he held no interest in frustrating our interests. Hawley’s point is that motive-based accounts of trust in general cannot cope with the concept of distrust. But, it’s worth pausing to reflect on her analysis. The idea of students as consumers, armed with information about previous students’ satisfaction levels, and the powers to influence course content and the form assessments should take, places the student and the academic teacher in opposition. The market model of consumers and producers encourages the student to adopt a distrustful stance towards the teacher and to regard the academic’s interest as distinct from the student’s interest. In other words, a non-moral, thin, functional conception of higher education precludes trust, and therefore precludes the recognition of authority, which in turn renders impossible an acquisition of authority by students through education. Less sceptical student-consumers might rely on their tutors and lecturers to hand over the learning materials required to pass the qualification, but such reliance actually turns a potentially authoritative educational relationship into a power relationship. Policy ideas like student partnership, in other words, seek to circumvent oppositional relations between producer and consumer, but the background horizon of higher education policy still rests on this unconvincing market relation.

Credence goods, like organic meat, fair trade coffee or windscreen glass, are substantively different from a credence good such as higher education. While kite-marked windscreen glass involves reliance that the glass will shatter relatively safely in an accident, a university education ought to involve a trusting commitment between students, academics and the university itself. However, the lifeworldly horizon of the university appears differently to policy-makers, senior managers, future employers, students, and academics. Different relationships of trust, authority and obedience obtain in the interactions in the different relationships. For instance, the students and staff might rely on or trust the university administrators to organize facilities for teaching students, while the administrators might rely on students and staff to fulfil their roles. The instrumentalized climate of high-fees, highly indebted higher education helps to generate an attitude from many students, administrators and academic teachers that students are, indeed, justified in regarding themselves as consumers, or lecturers are justified in delivering a body of knowledge. Student partnership recommends policy initiatives such as involving students in choosing and designing assessment methods, deciding upon curriculum content, involvement in faculty and university committee work. From a consumer perspective this can be understood in terms of an increase in student power and student voice.

The practices and policies involved in a marketized higher education system are indeed transformative, but not in educational terms. Educational authority becomes power in the labour market, trust becomes distrust or reliance, commitment to diligent study
evaporates, and reliance on support from the *alma mater* turns into a functional reliance on the academic teacher to provide knowledge. Authority is replaced by leadership. Andrei Marmor suggests that ‘a leader is typically one who can influence others’ conduct without having the requisite authority or regardless of the authority one does have’ (Marmor, 2011, p. 245). Leadership, for Marmor, is essentially coordinative. The leader is followed because the followers grasp that the leader’s instructions serve a recognised coordinative purpose, not because the instruction comes from the leader (Marmor, 2011, p. 245). Broadly, the relations involved in fig. (A) become relations in fig. (B).

![Fig. (A)](image)

![Fig. (B)](image)

The policy of student partnership does not generate mutual relations of trust between the students and their academic teachers. The moral relations of trust and authority at (A) are all too easily transformed in an overly instrumentalized higher education into strategic relations of power and distrust at (B). Recall for Hawley that distrust was a reliance towards
those relied upon, coupled with a lack of commitment from the trustee. Formalized student voice and engagement to help design curriculum, or determine modes of assessment, or ‘inclusive’ representation (without providing appropriate support and training) imposes student engagement from outside the teacher-student relationship. The instruction to include students in academic arrangements is coordinative, and distributed by leaders. The outside imposition, unless done in a way that takes pains to protect the authority of the academic teacher, undermines relations of authority and trust between students and their teachers at university. Educational (intellectual) commitments (a tacit background contract between teacher and student) between students and teachers reduce, damaging the legitimacy of the teacher’s authority. Authority, without recognition (from the student) becomes pure power, and the purpose (or output) of the process of higher education is no longer the gradual development of authority (in the student becoming a graduate) from the university via academic teachers, but the acquisition of power to be held in the labour market. Relations of trust and authority degrade in a culture of instrumentalism, and this degradation can be seen as a fundamental inefficiency and a misdirected waste of time and effort. Onora O’Neill makes much the same point about trust in conditions of transparency. Where outcomes and targets are tracked, the incentive to game the outcomes increases, trust reduces and authority diminishes (O’Neill, 2002). The policy of student partnership, therefore, unless very carefully introduced in ways which protect academic teachers’ authority, only helps to further hollow out higher learning.

Conclusions

Discussion of the concept of authority too often involves a confusion between epistemic and deontic varieties of authority, and between power, leadership and authority. The example of de jure authority in higher education systems illustrates this confusion and shows us how authoritative relationships can be eroded and transformed into relations involving distrust. Moreover, authoritative teachers, making judgements about their students and taking responsibility for preparing students to act in the world show us that there is meaningful instrumental value attached to authoritative teachers. Attempts to marketize higher education erode this value associated with liberalism via Locke.

Higher education ought not to be regarded as a search good, experience good, nor as a ‘post-experience good’. We should instead consider higher education as a credence good, however, a credence good which involves trust (and therefore authority) rather than mere reliance. The trust and authority involved in such a credence good render policies oriented towards student partnership problematic insofar as these undermine the academic teacher’s authority and, therefore, the purpose of higher education to pass on a sense of authority from one generation to the next. Higher education must be understood in more than functional terms. Its purposes reach beyond professional training, income generating research, and the development of scientific knowledge towards Oakeshott’s language of a university education.

The state in democratic society ought to preserve the legitimate authority of institutions which help to sustain a democratic public sphere. We should understand democracy as a pluralist system involving different sources of authority in society that underwrite an attitude of critical trust towards the state itself. Universities should hold a pivotal position in this world. Advocates of marketization of university education should understand the full costs of their preferred policy, in both educational and political terms.

References


