Countering the Risks of Vocationalisation in Master's Programmes in International Development

Tobias Denskus, PhD

Malmö University, School of Arts and Communication

tobias.denkus@mah.se

Daniel E. Esser, PhD

American University, School of International Service

esser@american.edu

Abstract

We review the ontological and pedagogical origins of International Development graduate education in the context of increasing pressures to 'professionalise' graduate curricula. We apply Giroux's concept of 'vocationalisation' to argue that professionalisation risks undermining the field's intellectual foundations in an elusive quest to equip students with functional rather than intellectual skills. Acknowledging ever-growing competition among graduates for gainful employment in this sector, we argue that instructors of International Development should recommit to the field's reflective tradition by creating spaces for transformative education and develop a repoliticised ethos that critically engages global capitalism.

Keywords

International development, graduate education, skills, professionalisation, vocationalisation

Introduction

‘The educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end’

(Dewey 1916: 59).

For over three decades, higher education has been undergoing an accelerating process of privatisation and corporatisation (see McGettigan 2013 for an example). This process is characterised by rising student enrolment and a focus on global recruitment, increasing educational costs for domestic students coupled with mounting demands for external fundraising, public-private partnerships and greater alignment of curricula with labour market demands. Hickel (2013) has pointed to ‘voluntourism’ as a related trend specifically in the context of graduate education on International Development (see also Lough 2013; Vrasti 2013; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). Extending Hickel’s critique of voluntourism, we explore the grey area between the ‘professionalisation’ of International Development curricula—i.e., efforts to align curricula with employers’ demands—as part of ongoing privatisation and corporatisation of higher education and the resulting risk that critical inquiry is sacrificed for the sake of maximising graduates’ employability. Reflection on this challenge has already begun in some social science disciplines (Lee, Foster and Snaith 2014). We believe that a debate on its dimensions in and implications for learning and teaching in International Development is overdue.

The field of International Development was founded and initially also dominated by scholars from multiple disciplines reflecting critically on the problems of large-scale development efforts and debating alternative approaches (Harriss 2002). More recently, a growing number of International Development instructors have had careers in aid agencies and international

non-governmental organisations (INGOs) prior to assuming academic appointments. At the same time, privatisation and corporatisation have incentivised core faculty to engage in collaborative research and policy-making with International Development agencies and INGOs. MA programmes in International Development have also been proliferating globally. While we can only speculate about the underlying drivers of the latter trend, several factors deserve consideration. First, cultural facets of globalisation have catalysed interest in and sensitivity to challenges commonly subsumed under the label of International Development. In addition, increasing media coverage and the rise of social media have made pressing concerns more visible, ranging from the local to the global. Problems caused by climate change, conflict and joblessness are among those that now feature regularly in television and online news and debates. This has also led to an increasing demand among high school graduates and college students to gain ‘real experience’ in order to claim an ‘authentic’ exposure to these issues (Hickel 2013), leading to higher demand for International Development Master’s programs. Global engagement by celebrities and philanthrocapitalists (Hall, Shah and Carr 2014; Chouliaraki 2013) have spurred further enthusiasm among prospective MA students to partake in an ostensibly global and realistic quest to ‘end poverty’ (Sachs 2005). Although it is widely held that potential future employers seek out and reward tokenistic experiences such as voluntourism, the evidence for this is surprisingly thin (Hickel 2013: 24).

There have been equally important changes on the supply side of International Development Master’s programmes. Universities are facing growing expectations to offer educational packages that ‘prepare students to compete in the world economy’ (Bryan 2011: 6) by allowing them to transition seamlessly into a highly competitive labour market. ‘Within the neoliberal era of deregulation and the triumph of the market, many students and their families

no longer believe that higher education is about higher learning but about gaining a better foothold in the job market. Colleges and universities are perceived ... as training grounds for corporate berths' (Giroux n.d.). Put simply, students and parents want to see tangible returns on their educational investments. This has increased the pressure on both programme directors and faculty to 'professionalise' International Development curricula as well. Although some classic texts that formed the core of International Development as an emerging field of activist scholarship in the 1970s and early 1980s – for example Freire's (1970) work on conscientisation and Chambers' (1983) groundbreaking arguments on participatory practice – are still included in many if not virtually all International Development syllabi, curricula increasingly incorporate modules such as skills workshops focusing on career planning and technical training modules on software packages that are geared toward maximising graduates' employability rather than nurturing critical thinking. Although International Development scholars regularly purport to hold an anti-corporatist stance and some programs reflect this in the way they are taught, the pressure to professionalise is nonetheless real.

In this essay, we apply Giroux's concept of the 'vocalisation' (cf. Williams 1999: 749) of higher education to capture the risks emanating from a drive toward maximising graduates' employability in a global and ever more privatised International Development industry that is perpetually reinventing demands to safeguard its financial viability (Frynas 2008; de Haan 2009; Metayer 2012). Following Giroux (n.d.), 'the creeping vocalization and subordination of learning to the dictates of the market has become an open and defining principle of education at all levels of learning'. (n.p.) We employ 'vocalisation' analytically to take stock of the extent to which contemporary educational programmes on both sides of the Atlantic 'fall in with' international development institutions (Selby and

Kagawa 2011: 15) as growing segments of national and international labour markets by increasingly assuming the role of a supplier of readily trained human resources. At the same time, we utilise the concept as a heuristic device to develop alternative approaches to professionalisation of International Development Master's programmes that acknowledge the responsibility of educators to prepare students for gainful employment while remaining true to the field's epistemological and ontological roots.

[...]

Countering the risks of vocationalisation

Short of resigning in the face of the transformative effects of global capitalism on higher education, how can International Development Master's programmes reclaim space for critical reflection across disciplinary boundaries rather than focus on marketable skills training? According to McCloskey (2011: 43) and in direct contradiction to the functionalist propositions discussed above, the skills required for such transhegemonic debates 'need to be rooted in a commitment to social change' (2011: 42) or, in Selby and Kagawa's words, 'resistance and transgression' (2011: 20). It is precisely 'intellectual inquiry that is unpopular and critical [which] should be safeguarded and treated as an important social asset' (Giroux n.d.). As a result, '[i]t is not our job to simply train people ... in the most current thinking' (Carr 2012) but to provide a safe space for exploring alternatives to dominant approaches in International Development. 'The answer, then,' according to Carr (2012), 'is perhaps not a demand-driven degree, but instead an academic program that engages and cultivates relationships across the implementation world to remain responsive to need and demand' (2012).

To begin this journey, we suggest that teachers of Master's programmes on International Development should assess how they currently present these programmes to prospective students. We have noted, for instance, that the contents of online advertisements of programmes vary widely: while some give centre stage to skill formation and employability, others emphasize a commitment to fostering critical inquiry. Given that students, in our experience, scrutinize a range of programmes prior to applying, clearer communication of shared ontological convictions and resulting curricula strikes us as an important first step.

Second, rather than providing quick dips into presumed realities of 'the poor' in the tradition of voluntourism, long-term learning partnerships between students in the global North and their peers in developing countries should harness the rise of social media and resulting new modes of connecting classrooms with practice. Contemporary learning and teaching in International Development can thus utilise a greater variety of media in order to connect students with the world in a highly cost-effective manner. In addition to gaining new insights into practices of International Development, such exchanges are also likely to facilitate exchanges on theories emanating from the global South, which often challenge ontological paradigms framing curricula in the global North (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Acharya 2011; Acharya and Buzan 2010).

As we have argued above, if graduate education in International Development is transforming itself into a cog in the wheel of a global industry whose main incentive is its own prosperity and survival (de Haan 2009), this constitutes a rupture with the field's conceptual foundation and betrays students' hopes to become catalysts of change. Our observation is that the demand for Master's degrees in International Development is robust; however, we are of course aware that our proposition to rebalance in-demand skill sets with critical reflection on

the field and its approaches carries a risk of decreasing enrolment. In addition, it could also result in a higher likelihood of graduates finding it difficult to secure jobs. We hope that an exchange with fellow instructors of related subjects will showcase concrete examples of bridging vocational and intellectual dimensions in teaching International Development, as well as in higher education more generally. We also hope such a discussion would question whether more reflective and critically minded graduates are automatically less employable. Despite these concerns, we maintain that International Development only stands a chance to change dominant structures and approaches if it succeeds in at least semi-autonomously defining and pursuing its objectives of critical education. The case for it therefore ‘cannot be made in the name of professionalism’ (Giroux, n.d.; see also Giroux 2002). Although professionalisation promises tangible improvements in connecting theory and practice, the latter must not define the boundaries of the former. There is no hope to move beyond the kinds of hand pump-type quick fixes to development challenges if the field allows outsiders to frame its pedagogical agenda. For those scholar-teachers who agree that ‘the ultimate aim of [scholarly] production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality’, (Chomsky 2002: 26), our principal responsibility as educators is to assist students in challenging what Giroux has termed ‘critical’ but nonetheless consciously apolitical stances of scholarship and ‘hegemonic’ stances that seek to collaborate with and benefit from industry leadership (Demetrian 2001: 66; compare with Joseph 2013; Joseph 2012; Giroux, 1994). This requires a rediscovery of more radical approaches that leverage digital technologies, facilitate knowledge creation between the global North and South, and recreate a faculty ethos that combines scholarship with a commitment to intellectually re-‘occupy’ the spaces of debate that have been allowed to determine what ‘useful’ higher education entails.

Acknowledgements

We thank Jed B. Byers, Carl LeVan, James Mittelman, Andrea Papan and Randolph Persaud for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay. Penny Welch, Susan Wright and two anonymous reviewers provided very helpful guidance as well. Jed B. Byers also conducted some of the background research and helped copy-edit the manuscript.

References

- Acharya, A. (2011) *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Acharya, A. and Buzan, B. (eds) (2010) *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia*, London: Routledge.
- Arce, A. and Long, N. (2000) *Anthropology, Development and Modernities*, London: Routledge.
- Baillie Smith, M. and Laurie, N. (2011) 'International volunteering and development: global citizenship and neoliberal professionalisation today', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36, no. 4: 545–559.
- Bellow, E. and Feron, M. (2011) 'Do we lose the vision of a long term strategic profit making? Analysis of the interaction of business, public policy and business school responsibilities: the case of the 2008-2009 financial crisis', *Journal of Management Policy and Practice* 12, no. 4: 27–37.
- Bracken, S., Dart, G. and Pickering, S. (2011) 'Evolution or revolution? An analysis of the changing faces of development in the United Kingdom', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 12, Spring: 47–65.
- Bryan, A. (2011) 'Another cog in the anti-politics machine? The 'de-clawing' of development education', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 12, Spring: 1–14.

- Carr, E. (2012) 'Development Studies as a degree in translation',
<http://www.edwardrcarr.com/opentheechochamber/2012/06/03/development-studies-as-a-degree-in-translation/> (accessed 15 March 2014).
- Chambers, R. (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, New York: John Wiley.
- Chomsky, N. (2002) *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, New York: Routledge.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2013) *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J.L. (2012) *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- De Haan, A. (2009) *How the Aid Industry Works: An Introduction to International Development*, Boulder: Kumarian Press.
- Demetrian, G. (2001) 'Reading Giroux Through a Deweyan Lens: pushing Utopia to the outer edge', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 33, no. 1: 57–76.
- Denskus, T. and Esser, D.E. (2013) 'Social media and global development rituals: a content analysis of blogs and tweets on the 2010 MDG Summit', *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3: 409–424.
- Dever, M. (2004) 'Women's Studies and the discourse of vocationalism: some new perspectives', *Women's Studies International Forum* 27, no. 5 & 6: 475–488.
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York: Macmillan.
- Escobar, A. (1988) 'Power and visibility: development and the invention and management of the Third World', *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 4: 428–443.
- Fechter, A. and Hindman, H. (2011) *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Worker*, Sterling: Kumarian Press.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

- Frynas, J.G. (2008) 'Corporate social responsibility and international development: critical assessment', *Corporate Governance: An International Review* 16, no. 4: 274–281.
- Giroux, H.A. (2002) 'Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of higher education: the university as a democratic public sphere', *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 4: 425–463.
- Giroux, H.A. (1994) 'Educational leadership and school administration: Rethinking the meaning of democratic public culture', in T. Mulkeen, N.H. Cambron-McCabe and B. Anderson (eds) *Democratic Leadership*, Norwood: Ablex, 31–47.
- Giroux, H.A. (n.d.) 'Neoliberalism and the vocationalization of higher education', http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/vocalization.htm (accessed 15 March 2014).
- Grindle, M.S. and Hildebrandt, M.E. (1999) 'The Development Studies sector in the United Kingdom: challenges for the new millennium', *Report to the Department for International Development*, Cambridge: Harvard Institute for International Development.
- Gyoh, S. (2011) 'Development education and the global response trading purpose for professionalism', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 12, Spring: 87–95.
- Hall, B.S., Shah, A.V. and Carr, E.R. (2014) 'Bono, Band-Aid, and before: Celebrity humanitarianism, music and the objects of its action', in G.J. Andrews, P. Kingsbury and R.A. Kearns (eds) *Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music*, Burlington: Ashgate, 269–288.
- Harriss, J. (2002) 'The case for cross-disciplinary approaches in International Development', *World Development* 30, no. 3: 487–496.

- Hickel, J. (2013) 'The "Real Experience" industry: Student development projects and the depoliticisation of poverty', *Learning and Teaching* 6, no. 2: 11–32.
- Joseph, C. (2012) 'Internationalizing the curriculum: pedagogy for social justice', *Current Sociology* 60, no. 2: 239–257.
- Joseph, C. (2013) 'Internationalizing the curriculum: economic rationalist or transformative approach', *ASA Footnotes* 41, no. 1: 5.
- Kendzior, S. (2013) 'The perils of the prestige economy',
<http://sarahkendzior.com/2013/06/16/the-perils-of-the-prestige-economy> (accessed 12 March 2014).
- Kenny, C. (2012) 'Get an MBA, save the world', *Foreign Policy* 193: 26–27.
- Lee, D., Foster, E. and Snaith, H. (2014) 'Implementing the Employability Agenda: A Critical Review of Curriculum Developments in Political Science and International Relations in English Universities', *Politics*, published online: September 3. doi: 10.1111/1467-9256.12061.
- Lough, B.J. (2013) 'Social Work perspectives on international volunteer service', *The British Journal of Social Work*, first published online 21 January.
- McCloskey, S. (2011) 'Rising to the challenge: development education, NGOs and urgent need to social change', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 12, Spring: 32–46.
- McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, London: Pluto Press.
- Metayer, G. (2012) 'The Influence of Corporate Interests on USAID's Development Agenda: The Case of Haiti' (Ph.D. thesis, University Graduate School, Florida International University).

- Mohan, G. and Wilson, G. (2005) 'The antagonistic relevance of Development Studies', *Progress in Development Studies* 5, no. 4: 261–278.
- Mosse, D. (2011) *Adventures in Aidland*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Mosse, D. and Lewis, D. (2006) 'Theoretical approaches to brokerage and translation in development', in D. Mosse and D. Lewis (eds) *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*, Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 1–22.
- Oxenham, J. (1980) 'Should Development Studies be taught in Britain?', *Bulletin of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex* 11, no. 3: 49–53.
- Podolny, J.M. (2009) 'The buck stops (and starts) at Business School', *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 6: 62–67.
- Rashid, T. and Flanagan, J. (2011) *International Development: Linking academia with Development Aid and Effectiveness*, Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.
- Sachs, J. (2005) *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*, New York: Penguin Press.
- Selby, D. and Kagawa, F. (2011) 'Development education and education for sustainable development: Are they striking a Faustian bargain?', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 12, Spring: 15–31.
- Shore, C. and Wright, S. (1997) 'Policy: A new field of anthropology', in C. Shore and S. Wright (eds) *Anthropology of Policy: Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power*, Abingdon: Routledge, 3–39.
- Sumner, A. and Tribe, M.A. (2004) 'The nature of Development Studies: an exploration from the standpoint of the British-Irish Development Studies Association', paper prepared for the DSA annual conference, London.

Vrasti, W. (2013) *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*,
London: Routledge.

Vrasti, W. and Montsion, J.M. (2014) 'No good deed goes unrewarded: the values/virtues of
transnational volunteerism in neoliberal capital', *Global Society* 28, no. 3: 336–355.

Williams, J.J. (1999) 'Brave new university', *College English* 61, no. 6: 742–751.

Woolcock, M. (2007) 'Higher education, policy Schools, and Development Studies: what
should Masters degree students be taught?', *Journal of International Development* 19,
no. 1: 55–73.

PRE-PRINT EXCERPT