Towards a theory for the study of responsible business practices in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores the difficulties of finding an appropriate theoretical framework for a doctoral dissertation examining revenue-generating language programs at post-secondary institutions. It briefly examines the history of language programs in higher education in the developed English-speaking world and the current situation of many institutions that now include English as a Second or Additional Language programs for foreign students. The purpose of the existence of such programs is not always clear. Is it to build the capacity of international students so as to diversify the campus by enriching it with a more diverse student body? Or to generate revenue from foreign students desperate to learn English? Or are the reasons more complex?

Regardless of the motivation, the existence of such programs at universities in developed countries is widespread. My doctoral dissertation explores how such programs are marketed and administered. One of the challenges of this study has been to find a suitable theoretical framework that allows for the espousal of benevolent educational philosophy (the growth of the individual cognitively, culturally and personally) while entertaining the possibility of socially responsible business practices in higher education. This paper explores some of the issues and tensions of selected theories and their application to this type of study.

Introduction

This paper will examine a variety of theoretical frameworks that have been considered for a doctoral dissertation focussing on some of the problems of marketing and recruitment for revenue-generating English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at the University of Calgary. First I will offer a brief history of ESL programs and then outline the methodology of the project. Then I will delve into the theoretical aspect of the project, outlining which theoretical framework was originally chosen for the thesis and why. I will then go on to discuss why this theoretical approach proved problematic and as such, was ultimately discarded. Finally, I will describe the process used to find a more appropriate framework, revealing which other approaches were considered and which one has been determined to be the most appropriate for the research. In addition, I will touch upon some of the philosophical assumptions and ethical dilemmas of the process.

One purpose of this paper is to invite discussion about both the theoretical approaches themselves, as well as their appropriateness for a study that focuses on business practices (and in particular, marketing) in an educational context.

Background

My background both as a language teacher and program administrator of an ESL program housed under the then Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary led me to an interest in marketing and recruitment for language programs with a clear mandate to generate revenue that were targeted an international audience.

In conversations and my work with language program managers, I have heard about frustrations, lack of training on the part of program managers, lack of support from upper administration, and lack of resources (primarily in the form of a marketing and advertising budget). Much of this happens in conversations with program managers, but

what I want to know is the extent to which the documentation reflects or acknowledges this as part of the management practice. It was these topics that I wanted to explore in my doctoral research.

In the beginning, I was interested in documents that are available in the public sphere. I wanted to know what readily available resources, if any, exist to assist program managers. In other words, is there a corpus of literature, however small, available on this topic? If so, what does it say?

My hypothesis was that such documentation does exist, though it would take some searching to locate. As Atkinson and Coffey (2004) point out, "… it is important to recognize the extent to which many cultures and settings are self-documenting." (p. 56). Universities are among those social formations that depend upon policies and paperwork not only for archival purposes, but also as a guide to "inform future action" (p. 57). If the results proved this hypothesis wrong and no resources exist or if the corpus of literature was very small, then this would present a definite direction for future work in the field and a possible modification to my research, which is what happened.

The primary research question that has guided the study is: What do publicly available documents tell us about the marketing of revenue-generating language programs at post-secondary institutions in Canada?

Secondary questions that further shaped the study included:

1. What do these documents tell us about how language programs are (or ought to be) marketed in Canada?

2. Do these documents reveal any challenges faced by language program administrators? If so, what are they?

3. What are the implications of the contents of the documents?

Context

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English as a second language gained importance and interest, with ESL programs of various types starting in the U.S. in the 1940s (Pennington & Xiao, 1990). One particularly notable example from that decade is that the first intensive English program was established in the United States at the University of Michigan's English Language Institute in 1945. ESL teaching began to emerge as a profession in the same decade (Fox, 1988), since teachers were being hired specifically to teach the English language to foreign students, rather than to teach the language or literature to native speakers.

Other universities in the U.S. soon joined the trend of opening ESL programs in the 1950s and 1960s, but as Kaplan (1997) observes, they did so "without any forward planning, without any clear idea why such programs should exist". He goes on to explain that "because there was no forward plan in establishing [ESL programs], they were not clearly defined in relationship to other academic units with the university. Consequently, no definitive placement for [ESL programs] exists within the university framework" (Kaplan, 1997). This may explain, in part at least, why ESL programs are housed in a variety of units across campuses today and why their programming, operations and budgetary structures vary widely from one institution to another.

It was about a decade or two after ESL programs were first established on most campuses that there was a boom in their number across the U.S., with many more being established in the 1970s. By that time, they were no longer viewed simply as a way of teaching foreign students English, but also as a way of generating revenue for the university. As Eskey (1997) notes, "a great many new (ESL programs) were established in the 1970s", adding that this led to "widespread perception, probably accurate at the time, that such programs were sure-fire money makers". This marks a shift in how language programs were viewed within the institution, as they were no longer purely a scholarly pursuit, reserved for the most academically inclined students.

About the same time, we can observe how global market forces come into play when we examine where students came from in order to take ESL courses. "In any given year, larger numbers come from certain parts of the world (the Middle East in the 1970s,

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the Far East in the 1990s), mainly as a consequence of economic and political factors" (Eskey, 1997). One key point here is that the 1970s were a critical decade for ESL programs because three things happened at the same time: the number of programs increased dramatically; the programs began to be viewed as mechanisms to generate revenue for the institution and we begin to see how students from particular regions populate these courses, according to political and economic conditions.

After the boom in the 1970s, enrollments leveled off in the 1980s and competition increased (Eskey, 1997). Possibly due to this increase, "the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a rise in visibility for workplace instructional programs to improve workers' basic skills and English language proficiency" (Burt, 1995). Perhaps this was, in part, due to the fact that while enrollments for fee-paying foreign students may have leveled off, the numbers of immigrants, at least in North America, continued to swell, increasing the need for English language skills generally. Nolan (2001) points out that "the ESL population in British Columbia has increased some 334% from 1986 to 1995". This would seem to indicate that while the university market for ESL courses may have reached a saturation point at some time the 1980s or 1990s, the need for English language skills among people of varying levels of education and skill continued to increase.

The mid- to late -1990s saw another shift in the evolution of ESL programs, with an age of fiscal restraints and changes in the global economy. From an institutional point of view:

> in the 1980s and early 1990s … the willingness of universities and colleges to launch such programs and to make front-end investments [declined and] the fiscal restraints and budgetary cutbacks at the same institutions in the mid 1990s have been the motivation for a shifting of risk away from the institutional parent to the program itself. (Staczek, 1997) Emphasis in original.

Institutions began withdrawing support from programs, or making support conditional on enrollments. This placed many programs in a precarious position in the late 1990s when registrations from the previously lucrative markets of Japan and Korea

plummeted, due to economic decline in those countries (Eaton, 2004), creating additional pressures on program administrators. Heffernan and Poole (2005) also note that "limiting factors may include the effects of wars and terrorism, regional or global economic recession, and policy shifts in countries such as China". Hence, what happens in the world affects language program enrollments.

One probability is that as language programs continue to evolve in the 21st century, they will continue to be viewed both as sources of revenue for institutions, and as providers of skill training, rather than as one of the cornerstones of scholarly activity of the academy, and their enrollments will continue to be determined, at least in part, by political and economic conditions around the world.

ESL programs

With regards to who offers ESL programs, Cumming's 1991 study of almost 1000 ESL programs in BC shows a great variety in the types of providers:

> Of the total 990 ESL programs offered in B.C. in January 1991, 45% were provided by community colleges and university extension programs, 11% were provided by immigrant serving agencies, 12% were provided by private businesses, and the remaining proportion (less than 1%) were provided by distance education in people's homes or in specific workplaces. (Cumming, 1991)

Although Cumming's study is representative of only one Canadian province, it offers us an idea of the breakdown of the types of providers for ESL programs. Burt (1995) notes similar findings, adding private consultants, commercial job-training providers and union consortia to the list, especially for courses taught in the work place.

By limiting our scope to the post-secondary sphere, we find that ESL programs are housed within a wide variety of units, as noted by Kaplan (1997): English and Speech

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departments; Departments of foreign languages; student personnel services; Deans of Students offices; Departments of Linguistics; Departments of Education and Continuing Education.

Types of ESL programs offered in post-secondary institutions

As mentioned in the section on delimitations of the study, if the variety of places for programs to reside were not enough to render the question of how to gather valid data and study ESL programs at post-secondary institutions problematic enough, there is also the difficulty of a vast variety in the types of courses offered. Impey and Underhill (1994) note that types of ESL courses offered on any campus might include:

- "Year-round English – full-time and part-time
- Vacation courses – adult residential / non-residential
- Vacation courses – junior (12-18) residential / non-residential
- Courses for children (under 12)
- Executive / very intensive and one-to-one courses
- Specific courses (ESP) – business, technical, academic English, etc.;
- Courses for teachers."

Other programs that can be added are English for Academic Purposes courses, as well as any others that might be offered on campus.

This range of programming offers a variety of challenges to language program administrators who are expected to adapt both their curriculum and marketing strategies for the array of groups and individuals who take part in these courses. By examining the matter from that perspective, a number of possible audiences or target markets can be identified: students who apply directly to programs; students who apply through educational agents; companies and government organizations; chambers of commerce; teachers; and parents (Impey & Underhill, 1994).

In the case of English language programs, the market often encompasses the end-user (the student), as well as other decision-makers in the process, such as the parent who pays for the course, or an agent who might recommend one program over another, and guide student and parental choices in a particular direction. This offers a variety of challenges for researchers. It becomes difficult to identify who the decision makers are, how they might be influenced, what might constitute valid data when trying to establish who pays for courses and why they have chosen a particular course. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon language program administrators who wish to market their courses internationally to do just that. They must not only be cognizant of all the groups involved in the decision-making process, but also try to gather market research data to guide their marketing efforts (Eaton, 2005).

How, what and who we count when defining language programs

In order to gather valid data for marketing and research purposes, we must first decide "what" and "who" counts and why. Typical considerations include registration data, number of classroom or contact hours and types of teaching periods within a given program, as well as program financial information, each of which is briefly explored. Firstly, registration data are difficult to determine, as some schools have specific dates for registration and others have continuous intake. Also "a simple tally of 'classes' does not distinguish between part-time, half-time and full-time classes, obscuring distinctions in the amount of instructional contact time provided, as well as situations where students take more than one ESL class" (Cumming, 1991). This leads to a question of what constitutes full-time, half-time or part-time classes. Cumming (1991) suggests these designations: "full-time studies (over 21 hours per week); half-time ESL studies (10-20 hours per week), and part-time ESL studies (1-9 hours per week)". Others vary slightly, stating that full-time programs are 20-30 hours per week (Carkin, 1997) or even 25-30 hours per week (Eskey, 1997). These variances may not appear large, but if we count

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classroom hours for every course at various institutions over a long period of time, these differences may be significant.

Another variable is that although contact or classroom hours are important and are traditionally how programs define themselves as either part-time or full-time, there is a move towards reducing the number of contact hours and increasing "self access" to study materials, using technology, thus expanding the non-classroom hours and cutting costs (Witbeck & Healey, 1997). This shift makes determining what the actual number of program hours even more problematic. Additionally, it complicates decisions for students and others when considering which programs to choose because they can no longer compare prices based strictly on the number of classroom hours.

From an internal administrative point of view, there are also different ways of counting teaching periods: "weeks, course months (i.e. four week periods), calendar months, terms, semesters, or other artificial units" (Impey & Underhill, 1994). If one program counts by semesters and another program counts by weeks, registration data from these programs would be difficult to compare.

If we examine the matter from the point of view of registrations in programs, we must consider the "different sources of bookings, such as agency bookings (which are commissionable), direct bookings (which are not), renewals and re-enrollments from former students, block bookings from company clients, and perhaps closed group bookings from other sources such as schools or government agencies…" (Impey & Underhill, 1994). We would need to define the criteria in counting registrations. For example, if students re-enroll, are they counted once (as a student) or multiple times (once for each course in which they register)? Impey and Underhill (1994) pose the additional question of how or if students who attend on scholarship or on free placements resulting from promotional campaigns are counted in registration numbers.

Finally, when considering the variety of possible internal positioning of ESL programs on a campus, it must be noted that different units (e.g. academic departments, continuing education programs, student services offices) may well have different kinds of

budgetary structures (Eskey, 1997) with different restrictions, such as whether they are allowed to carry funds forward from one fiscal year to the next or if their budgets are managed in-house or by a budget officer for a parental unit. This may also complicate the matter of acquiring relevant information for marketing purposes, especially if language program administrators have restricted access to financial information about their own programs and must go through someone higher up to gather necessary figures in order to budget and plan properly.

In conclusion, if we take into consideration the possible units that may oversee or administer language programs on a campus, the wide variety of courses that may be offered and how they are counted in terms of hours or teaching units, the array of groups or individuals to whom courses may be marketed, the numerous possibilities for how to account for registrations and course bookings, as well as the variation in budgetary operations of programs, we begin to understand why little data is available on language programs both from within institutions and across them. Furthermore, it demonstrates the need to be cautious when considering the available data and to take into account that findings for any one program may not be generalized to other programs. Finally, the problematic nature of gathering and presenting valid data on language programs for marketing purposes is important not only for this paper, but also for language program administrators in general who seek reference points, guidance and ways of understanding to better plan, administer and market their courses.

Marketing

The field of marketing is both broad and deep. While an in-depth exploration of the field is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that how it is understood in business versus in education is quite different. Impey and Underhill (1994) offer a broad definition that serves us well: "Marketing means finding out what people want, then producing it and offering it to them. It is both a specific activity which needs to be carried out as a vital

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stage in the development of a new product, and a continuous process that is an integral part of everyday management activity." Emphasis in original.

Vining (2000) echoes the idea that marketing is the responsibility of program administrators. She discusses it within the context of education noting that, "the word 'marketing' used to be a negative concept to educators. Not anymore… School marketing has been transformed into an essential management function".

Miller (1997) points out how this applies to language programs, emphasizing the need to "understand that marketing a language program is a multidimensional endeavor with interactions among variables associated with student recruitment, student retention, and administrative operations." One important point is the need to differentiate between marketing and selling language courses (Eaton, 2003). Miller (1997) encourages us to:

> recognize the difference between peddling and marketing a language program. A peddling orientation views language program services as merchandise for sale. A marketing orientation endeavors to align prospective students' short-term and long-term needs and goals with language program strengths, and helps students obtain the information that they need to make informed decisions.

If we agree with these definitions, then we can see that marketing a language program is a complex task in itself (not to be confused with selling) and that it comprises only one facet of language program management.

Philosophical assumptions and ethical questions

This work has caused me to grapple with my own philosophy of education and the assumptions I make about business practices being incorporated into educational administration.

One of the underlying beliefs of this research is that it is possible to incorporate business practices such as marketing or revenue-generation into educational

administration and management in an ethical way that does not compromise either the quality of the education nor the students' experience or potential to learn, grow and think critically. Although there are ways to brainwash students, doing so is not the fault of business practices. A "traditional" educational system that doesn't talk about the bottom line, business or marketing, but which uses political propaganda or religious doctrine, it could be argued, has far more potential of having a negative effect on a child's education than does a desire to better the school, its facilities and its environment by generating revenue which can then be recycled back into resources that support student learning.

Theory

My research situates language programs within an international context. In addition to examining educational issues, it considers world events and economic factors that affect language programs. It borrows from educational policy theory insofar as it subscribes to the view that "a major theoretical assumption of those who study the international arena is that the world is interdependent and that global forces affect …. education systems" (Fowler, 1995). I position the global forces within a historical context, showing how they affect challenges faced by program administrators.

Originally, my research was informed by critical theory, which as Tyson (1999) points out, assumes "the impossibility of objective analysis", as all events are situated both temporally and culturally and perspectives may change over time. Tyson notes that we "live in a particular time and place, and [scholars'] views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience with their own culture". Thus, my paper contextualizes the question within a historical framework, and examines it through a critical theoretical lens.

This approach requires one to acknowledge his or her own subjectivity, and further, to self-position oneself within the study, noting biases and limitations. Having been both a manager of a language program at a public Canadian post-secondary

institution and a corporate consultant who has worked with various language programs with a decade of experience in the field, I have acquired in-depth knowledge. I feel the plight of language school administrators because I have been one. This experience undoubtedly shapes my presentation of the argument.

Further, I situate myself as a Canadian woman of British heritage working in a context she knows well. Critical theory acknowledges that one's gender and nationality carry certain biases, however unconscious, into any study. While one attempts to overcome them, their presence is inherent in the work. This study does not focus on gender issues, though it does mention them where it is appropriate.

Critical theory is often motivated by a desire to emancipate the oppressed. It explores oppression through a study of power and a subject's relationship to it. I explore issues related to power, powerlessness and disenfranchisement as they relate to the question addressed by the paper. It was at this point, which is a fundamental one for critical theorists, that I found a disjunction between the theory and my philosophical beliefs that business and education can indeed be hybridized to the benefit of the students.

I found a polarization in critical ideologies (Apple, 1992, 2001, 2004; Freire, 2001; McLaren, 1997, 2005; McLaren, Fischman, Sünker, & Lankshear, 2005) that constructed an "us and them" approach to education and educational management that, for me, did not fit with my own ideology. I found that humans were classified as either benevolent or malicious, with the benevolent being typically poor, socialist and oppressed and the malicious being the wealthy, politically conservative (or fascist) and oppressive. There was a sense that globalization is oppressive because multinationals (capitalists) benefit and the repressed foreign workers remain repressed. Emancipation is impossible as long as global business profits off the backs of the poor.

I questioned if things had to be so black and white. I asked myself, "What happens when people who believe in a type of liberal education that encourages self-enrichment, critical thinking and creates a positive, safe environment for students to take

calculated risks in order to break out of their known comfort zone and deepen their learning in ways previously unimagined, manage and administer programs that are also designed to generate revenue for the institution of which it is a part? Do such people exist?"

The answer was of course, yes, because I am one of them. I realized that the theoretical framework that I had chosen and which did seem to be the most logical at the beginning of the study, offered a way of examining data, and indeed, of examining the world, which was ultimately a poor fit with both my study and my own ideology. This was a turning point in my research. I realized that my belief that the use of business practices in education in no way had to diminish the value of education and that it did not have to be black or white or benevolent versus malicious, was a deeply rooted one. This rootedness was stronger than my desire to adhere to the only theoretical approach with seemed to fit with my work. This meant that either my study had to change or my theoretical framework did.

Thus began the search for a suitable theoretical framework for the project. Moreover, it also signified a philosophical anchor for my research not only for the dissertation but potentially for future work as well. I proceeded to carefully examine other possibilities.

In consultation with other graduate students and scholars, I was led towards appreciative inquiry ("Appreciative Inquiry Commons "; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2008; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). This approach is used in academia, business and the not-for-profit sectors. It seeks to uncover the best of what an organization is currently doing, using interviews with its members. From the data collected a plan for enriching the organization by building on what is working now.

This approach appealed to me because rather than polarizing the interested parties, it assumes that a core of positive traits exist that can be highlighted and expanded up on to create even more success in an organization. The literature resonated deeply with me and I felt it would be a good fit.

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The problem is that the approach is one of methodology rather than theory. Appreciative inquiry is very much based on the act of doing interviews with vested parties and then analyzing the data. The underlying idea that good exists in every organization is certainly a philosophical assumption, but it is not an academic theory. So, while the value base of this approach seemed refreshing and valid for my work, it failed to offer sufficient depth from a theoretical point of view.

Following discussions with my supervisor, Dr. J. Tim Goddard, I explored the roots of appreciative inquiry more intensely. I found that it was based in the construcionist school of thought. Being unfamiliar with constructionism, I delved into this more deeply, finding that it was a framework used mostly in psychology and sometimes sociology, and is linked to a methodology using narratives (mostly interviews) and that meaning is constructed from the narratives.

From there I sought a form of this theory that was used in educational fields. The "cousin" to constructionism clearly pointed towards constructivism, with Linda Lambert's work (1998; 2005) not only examining educational issues, but being solidly grounded in educational leadership.

I mentioned earlier that my hypothesis that documentation for my project would be forthcoming proved incorrect. I received little in terms of useful documentation relating to marketing policies or targets for enrolments or revenue generation. In order to continue exploring this topic, I turned to interviews with program managers to enrich the minimal data I had gathered through the collection of documents. This search for a theoretical base was ongoing throughout the interview process and the interview questions were influenced mostly a constructivist point of view, while also borrowing and being influenced by the appreciative inquiry approach, since this methodology relies heavily on interviews to gather data.

At the time of writing this paper, I have begun to read and understand Lambert's work and already I sense that her perspective will have a strong influence on my work. I feel that I have found the theoretical anchor that was missing at an earlier

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point in my research and that the timing of this is crucial, as my data has now been collected and I am about to embark on the analysis phase. As I move forward with the research I recognize the importance of finding a theoretical framework that not only fits with the study, but also is true to one's own way of understanding the world. I believe that it is possible to incorporate business practices into education in a responsible manner that ultimately benefits the students, who are also our customers.

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