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# Higher education as self-formation

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Q. What is it that is special and unique about higher education? What makes it distinct from other social institutions?

Q. What is the purpose of the field of knowledge we call 'higher education studies'?

# Fundamental social processes in higher education

- Biesta (2009): 'qualification, socialization, subjectification'
- Creation, reproduction and transmission of knowledge, understood critically i.e. open to change

The educational process can be understood as

**Formation of persons as social beings through immersion in (diverse bodies of) knowledge**

# What is 'formation of persons'?

## Other formation or self-formation?

Students: Objects or subjects?

- Should we understand students as objects of higher education, or as subjects? As people to whom things are done, or people who are learning to do things for themselves?
- Are people 'little screws' (Stalin's description) in a machine called 'society' or 'the economy'? Or as active human agents, making decisions about themselves and their lives? As people who are 'masters of their fate' and 'captains of their soul'?
- As a factor of production ('human capital')? Or as thinking producers and creators: self-creators and social creators?

# Higher education as self-formation:

## Empirical, Historical, Normative

*Higher Education as Self-Formation*. Inaugural Professorial Lecture at the UCL Institute of Education.

<https://www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/higher-education-and-lifelong-learning/higher-education-as-a-process-of-self-formation/>

- *Empirical*: ‘Higher education as self-formation rests on the irreducible fact that while learning is conditioned by external factors, by the learner’s background and resources, the institution, the curriculum, teaching and other circumstances, only the learner does the learning...
- *Historical*: Autonomous agency as ‘the key concept of modernity’ (Giddens). Agency freedom as means and end
- *Normative*: Higher education can be understood as ‘self-formation and the expansion of freedom’, and valued for its contribution to the growth of self-determining persons in relational settings, via immersion in knowledge

Q. What is agency freedom?

# *Invictus* – William Hanley (1849-1903)

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.





# Amartya Sen's three aspects of freedom

Sen, A. (1985). Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (4), 169-221

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality Re-examined*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

- *Control freedom* (negative freedom): freedom of the individual from external threat, coercion or constraint

Main understanding of freedom in liberal tradition – but if you are poor, you may be free in the sense of control freedom, but be unable to do much with it

- *Effective freedom* (positive freedom): freedom as the capacity of the individual to act

The exercise of effective freedom depends on the person's abilities or capacities, and resources, and on the social arrangements in which they live (individuals are nested in society)

- *Agency freedom* (will-power): freedom as the active human will, the capacity for self-directed conscious action

Arguably this is the key aspect of individual freedom, the 'master of my fate', 'captain of my soul' part of freedom, but it is conditioned by the other aspects of freedom

# Michel Foucault

“Freedom is the capacity and the opportunity to participate in one’s own self-formation.”

- Stephen Ball, *Foucault as Educator*, 2017. Cham: Springer, p. 69

The self is the only object that one can freely will “without having to take into consideration external determinations.”

- Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-82*, 2005. Transl. Graham Burchell. Houndmills: Palgrave, p. 133

# Agency freedom as both means and end; as medium and outcome of higher education

Research shows that graduates -

- Have a larger range of employment options
- Are more likely to be in good health, as are their families
- Have more advanced skill in the use of information and communications technology (electronic agency)
- Are more geographically mobile, independent of income level (personal confidence and agency freedom)
- Report higher levels of inter-personal trust (also = greater personal agency)
- Are more likely to state that they have a say in government (also = greater personal agency)
- Are more positive about migration and cultural diversity

Walter McMahon, *Higher Learning, Greater Good* (2009); OECD, *Education at a Glance* (various years); OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2017: International migration in a shifting world* (2016) etc

## THE AGENCY FREEDOM OF STUDENTS:

Q. What do students want to make of themselves in higher education?

# What is student agency freedom? Can we have a general theory of student agency?

Such a theory would need to include the desires in students to

- invest in the self to gain economic benefits such as rates of return, employability (economic capital / human capital)
- enter professions and occupations and make a career
- secure a broader set of opportunities and possibilities
- achieve social status/ prestige/ social respect

**and . . . . .**

## ..... also

- learn via knowledge in specific disciplines. Varying fields of knowledge and professional training shape us into different people—compare engineering students and music students
- achieve continuing self-cultivation through learning
- build in oneself skills and personal attributes (cultural capital)
  
- make useful contacts and networks (social capital)
- make friends, negotiate marriage partners
  
- express oneself artistically, make beautiful, truthful, useful things
- express oneself politically, work with others to achieve social change and transformation

**. . . . . above all, perhaps . . . . .**

- 'find oneself'
- grow up
- shape one's future
- become a person in charge of one's own life
- become a new person

*DISCUSSION GROUPS: 10 MINUTES*

Q. What theories or ideas about education can help us understand student self-formation?



# Theories the feed into the self-formation idea

- As a philosophy and practice of education, self-formation has its first antecedent in Confucian learning as self-cultivation
- The Kantian/Humboldtian idea of Bildung
- Dewey, CP Mead and the American pragmatists work with a variation of Bildung
- The psychology of individual self-determination is another intellectual resource
- Human capital theory in economics explains economic self-investment in terms of market-based social value

But higher education as self-formation does what the consumption paradigm pretends to do but does not do. It puts the student at the centre of the frame

# Confucian self-cultivation

- Confucian self-cultivation installs in each person responsibility for their own development in the framework of pre-given social relations

“ The great strength of modern East Asia is its self-definition as a learning civilization.” This may be “the most precious legacy of Confucian humanism.”

Weiming Tu (2013). Confucian humanism in perspective. *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, 7 (3), pp. 333-338

# Bildung

- Self-formation in Kant's definition of the Enlightenment meant the release of humans from their "self-incurred tutelage" through the exercise of their "own understanding". Here the role of education is to cultivate the inner self in both intellectual and ethical terms, to form citizens in public rationality who will constitute emerging civil society. Kant emphasised that Bildung would not occur by itself, it required education.
- The aim of education is "the active autonomous person within the framework of social life", a rational subject who uses reason in a public way and "lives in the public sphere among other individual beings."

Kivela, A. (2012). From Immanuel Kant to Johann Gottlieb Fichte – Concept of education and German idealism. In Siljander, P., Kivela, A. and Sutinen, A. (eds.) (2012). *Theories of Bildung and Growth: Connections and controversies between Continental educational thinking and American pragmatism*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p. 59

- Bildung implies an educational process dedicated to being and becoming, to the open-ended evolution of human potential, not static measures of skills and knowledge. Its notion of perfectibility resembles Confucian self-cultivation: the goal is never achieved. Self-formation, a never-ending responsibility, opens new horizons as it proceeds. The educability of the self-forming learner is not fixed but is continually expanding.
- Like Confucianism in the Han dynasty in China, the German Bildung idea became annexed to state formation. Von Humboldt wanted a formative curriculum that was broad and deep, grounded in history, classical languages and literature, linguistics, science and research

Q. In what other social sites – aside from higher education – does student self-formation take place?

# The larger context of self-formation

- This student-centred view of higher education parallels other changes in modern societies, in which people are understood as self-determining individuals, including themes such as
  - making our own careers
  - social networking and its positioning of us as ‘public persons’
  - the emphasis on personal cultural identity, ‘who I am’
  - consumer as decision-maker with a range of choices
  - fashion, body management and self-image
  - the idea we make and choose our key personal relations
  - mobility and choice in where we live

# What then distinguishes higher education in student self-formation?

1. Higher education is nested in *knowledge sets*, disciplines, and these enable students to self-form in different ways
2. The role of *teaching* (NB. Vygotsky's ZPD, Zone of Proximal Development, in which learners require mentoring)
3. Student self-formation is *socially nested*. We are always individuals. However, a primary difference between varying kinds of socially-nested higher education is in the varying social relations in which self-formation occurs

- “ The true development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, it is from the social to the individual.”

Lev Vygotsky (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 36

- For Vygotsky self-formation and social-formation are simultaneous – the child’s early relational speech installs reflexivity, a double-coded self, socially separated *and* socially embedded



“ The Confucian emphasis on sympathy and empathy suggests ... Self-interest, no matter how enlightened, is never adequate as a basic principle for personal growth, let alone a cornerstone of national policy”

Weiming Tu (1996). Beyond the Enlightenment mentality: A Confucian perspective on ethics, migration and global stewardship. *The International Migration Review*, 30 (1), p. 68

Q. To what extent should higher education  
*prescribe* the content of desired social  
relations in which self-formation occurs?  
To what extent should individual students  
determine this for themselves?

DOES PRESCRIPTION OF SOCIAL VALUES CONTRADICT SELF-FORMATION?

Q. What does 'higher education as self-formation' leave out?

# Limits to student self-formation (constraints and limits of the self)

- Choices in higher education are conditioned and limited by finance, location, what is available, structural flexibility, etc
- Not all institutional education provides scope for self-formation
- Significant others shape educational decisions, self-formation is other-formed (parents, friends, employers, teachers, etc)
- States and other authorities regulate our lives to a degree
- Our upbringing and schooling shapes us. Agency freedom often emerges gradually in the first degree years, punctuated by sudden changes and breakthroughs.
- Perhaps doctoral students embody higher education as self-formation more clearly than first degree students. Life is a slow road to freedom

# Concluding thoughts

- We mostly emphasise structure, and structural constraints. It is important to focus also on **agency** because it is the way through the structural constraints
- Higher education can be understood as a process of student self-formation
  - ... in social contexts,
  - ... by socially-nested persons
  - ... under conditions that they do not individually control

# Self-formation is broadly inclusive

- Compared to Bildung, Dewey and Confucian self-cultivation, the market-consumer paradigm drastically shrinks the value of higher education to both individuals and societies. It's greatly inferior as an explanation of higher education!
- But some students do invest in themselves as human capital, calculating their lifetime earnings, some even seeing themselves as consumers (more in high fee UK).
- Nearly all future graduates want employability, and many hope to achieve social position through education. So the economic paradigm is not wholly wrong

- The point is that there are also other ways in which students expand themselves, their resources and their projects
- Some love the subjects they study: knowledge is an end in itself. Some intensively engage in cultural or political action on campus. Some care about the common good and want to work on global problems. Some want to make a marriage. Many are just finding themselves while moving into adult life
- There is *no necessary conflict* between ‘instrumental’ goals (education for job, career and earnings, social position, etc), and people who enrol because they love learning, or want to find themselves. Many students want all these things at the same time. Students decide the balance between goals, which can change over time

- So no existing social science or policy paradigm (human capital theory, consumption, social position, love of learning, social activism, etc) apply to *all* students, *all* the time, everywhere.
- None is a universal or sufficient explanation of the contribution of higher education to students, society or economy
- Yet that is how human capital theory, the consumer paradigm, the theory of positional goods, Bourdieu's capitals, even liberal education, present—as both necessary *and sufficient*. They are contending claims for the status of single transcendent truth
- Each idea/practice of higher education suggested by these theories is necessary but not sufficient.
- The framing of higher education should encompass all of these phenomena, all of these contributions to person-making



- The common element is the self-forming student. This includes all the different ways that students build agency, and by augmenting themselves extend their effective freedoms
- Arguably, Higher Education as Self-Formation *is a general theory*, albeit (like all social theory) able to be understood as varying by national-regional-cultural contexts
- The next step is to operationalise HESF as empirical research. We cannot observe and measure self-formation, but we can measure many of the manifestations and aspects of it. I hand over to Yusuf at this point ...