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Educational commodification and the (economic) sign value of learning outcomes

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If managerialism points to the ideological foundations and bureaucratisation of contemporary education, marketisation signals its commodification, image and exchange. This paper brings to bear the prevailing influence of marketisation on education. It begins with a brief description of the European context and development of learning outcomes, and outlines the (economic) rationale for their existence. It then sets out to explore the logic of learning outcomes, asking: what is lost in the process of education being exchanged as a commodity? We argue that marketisation, through its constituent concepts of commodification, image and exchange, seduces as an education 'spectacle' and ultimately shapes individuals' value positions. In essence, marketisation, grounded in contemporary neoliberal economics, privileges quantitative, at the expense of genuinely qualitative, educational substance. Further, we argue that learning outcomes are a simulacrum: like other signifiers of commodities, they appear meaningful (although they do exhibit meaning) but are ultimately incapable of delivering what they promise: transferable skills, at most, but not education. Ethical consequences are stark and signal the loss of the intrinsic value of education – a loss that begins with its own commodification.

Keywords: learning outcomes; commodification; exchange; marketisation; neoliberalism; privatisation; spectacle; simulacrum; 'lost knowledge'

Introduction

Learning outcomes present and legitimate new knowledge forms through a particular, managerialist, ideological construction that is key to understanding theoretical assumptions, conceptual meanings, and action purposes attaching to learning outcomes (O'Brien and Brancaleone 2011). However, as with any ideology, managerialism's triumph rests on its materialisation. We argue that managerialism results from what Guy Debord calls 'the concrete success of an autonomised system of economic production' (Debord 1967, 116). Social real-

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ity comes to be identified with an economic value system that reshapes all reality in its own image. Thus, the triumph of managerialist ideology is found in concreteness, specifically in an economic empirical base; that is, in itself, presumed to be beyond ideology, beyond naming, to the exclusion of alternative ideologies. In the dominant mode of economic production, managerialism acts as a significant technology of governance. Learning outcomes represent a singular paradigmatic force exemplifying this dual correspondence.

In this paper, we begin with an outline of the European context and development of learning outcomes. We then set out to explore how learning outcomes come to be measured and operated as a concrete site of exchange between learner and 'provider'. This involves a critical investigation of the impact of marketisation on education – specifically, its constituent concepts of commodification, image and exchange, that are grounded in contemporary neoliberal perspectives.

Learning outcomes: context and development

Learning outcomes, as defined by the April 2009 Bologna Process Report, are: 'statements of what the learner will know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a programme of learning' (Rauhvargers, Deane, and Pauwel 2009, 81). According to Bairbre Redmond (2007), one of Ireland's five 'Bologna Experts' appointed by the European Commission, learning outcomes describe an action or outcome that is demonstrable and assessable. In particular, they identify the skills and knowledge a learner can prove to have acquired after successfully completing a learning programme. These include the learner's skills in knowledge and understanding, problem-solving, transferable or professional skills and generic skills. They are 'officially' thought to benefit both students and teachers alike, signalling to students what is expected of them, while supporting the successful completion of their studies; and aiding teachers focus on what they require students to achieve, in terms of knowledge and skills. In addition, learning outcomes are said to benefit employers, offering a skills profile of the general knowledge and understanding that future graduates attain. Learning outcomes are classified in accordance with Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of six categories of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom et al. 1956). This classification functions as a generic criterion for assessment, quantifying levels of students' attainment.

The paradigmatic shift towards outcome-based learning at European policy level began in earnest in June 1999, when 30 Ministers of Education met to discuss the future of higher education. This culminated in 'The Bologna Declaration'; a declaration of intent to promote cooperation among member states with respect to quality assurance measures, degree programmes and systems of credits. The drive towards homologation was termed the 'Bologna Process', inspired by the plan to establish a central

authority for third-level education, the European Higher Education Authority. The Process set in motion a reform of higher education that was negotiated at various ministerial meetings in which signatory states set out to design a framework of comparable qualifications for higher education at national level, using a common system of learning outcomes. The Bergen Conference of 2005 expressed the will to develop a European framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area and a commitment to elaborate national frameworks of qualifications compatible with a European framework by 2010. Central to this vision was the facilitation of student and worker mobility across Europe (*exclusively* for Europeans), to be achieved by agreeing criteria for awarding graduate and postgraduate qualifications and simplifying the presentation of information about degree programmes.

The follow-up working group to the Ministerial Conference in London in 2007 stated that the two main aspects of the Bologna Process were: a focus on learners and a focus on learning outcomes (Stocktaking Report. 2007, 3). Learning outcomes were highlighted as central to the objectives of National Qualifications Frameworks, systems for credit transfer and accumulation, recognition of prior learning and the establishment of quality assurance measures (Stocktaking Report 2007, 16). The Background Paper for the Leuven Ministerial Conference reinforced the view that learning outcomes were of strategic importance (Background Paper. 2009, 16–17). The role of the learning outcomes' *methodology* (described simply as 'knowledge, skills and competencies descriptors') was noted as underpinning the architecture of the Process (Background Paper 2009, 16–17). It went so far as to claim that the success of the Bologna Process depended on the comprehensive implementation of a learning outcomes approach in higher education.

In 2009, a report from working groups appointed by the Bologna follow-up group to the Ministerial Conference in Leuven in 2009 noted that: 'a fully-fledged introduction of a learning outcomes-based culture across the European Higher Education Area still needs a lot of effort, and it will not be completed by 2010' (Rauhvargers, Deane, and Pauwel 2009, 57). Indeed, only six of the 46 signatory countries had completed their NFQ self-certification within the guidelines set. Furthermore, the Report confirmed that the lack of integration at national level between the qualifications framework, learning outcomes and European Credit Transfer System was still a problem. In less than one-half of the signatories to the Bologna Process, only some higher education institutions were working towards making the link between credits and learning outcomes (Rauhvargers, Deane, and Pauwel 2009, 80–81). One explanation given was confusion between learning outcomes and objectives (Rauhvargers, Deane, and Pauwel 2009, 13). If this is so, it suggests that there is a lack of agreement on the implementation of learning outcomes themselves, since, at national level, learning objectives have always served to define courses in higher education. Indeed, the Qualifications Frameworks Coordination Group responsible for drafting the 2009

Report harboured the suspicion that adoption by higher education institutions was not the same as implementation (Rauhvargers, Deane, and Pauwel 2009, 57). Despite these contradictions, official literature and policy developments forge ahead with the implementation of learning outcomes.

Legitimizing the concrete value of learning outcomes

The literature extolling the concrete value of learning outcomes points to the favourable functionality of learning objectives and their 'operationalising aims' (for example, Laurillard 1997). Proponents are forthright about positive behaviourist effects where normative, 'reinforced', forms of learning are upheld alongside demonstrable, applied skills (for example, Wearing 2004). Learning outcomes serve an administrative (managerialist) function: they quantify knowledge, define accreditation pathways, provide 'clear', fixed learning guidelines and expectations, and mechanisms of external accountability, all presented as concrete values. The appeal of learning outcomes is sought through the 'present' system, however foreclosed. Appeal, however, is one thing, materialisation another. Transformation requires that learning outcomes be concreted in representations and consciousness of realities; specifically, in reference to an economic empirical base that remoulds all reality in its own image (Debord 1967). Thus, learning outcomes are concretely valued because they are product-'assessable' (for example, Moon 2002; Ramsden 2003). This, in turn, facilitates the contractual means by which both learner and teacher are assessed. Hence, learning outcomes present a site of exchange value between learner and 'provider', characterised in economic value terms as customer-learner, producer-teacher. What is exchanged? The agreement itself is exchanged, as a representation and consciousness of real socio-economic interface. The product or educational good/service too is exchanged, 'agreed' upon by two parties or more. Learning outcomes, thus, are a (predictive) promise to be actualised in exchange with students, possible employers, and those responsible for providing funding (government, private enterprise, taxpayers, parents and students themselves). Moreover, in accordance with the ultimate expression of concreteness, learning outcomes are results-driven and value-quantifiable – learning 'outcomes', literally, signify their concrete value.

Learning outcomes: educational commodification, image and exchange

If managerialism points to the ideological foundations and bureaucratisation of contemporary education, marketisation signals its commodification, image and exchange. Learning outcomes exemplify this dual correspondence. But what values are produced by the marketisation of education and how do they materialise? To shed some light, a broader socio-political and ethical context is needed.

In the post-industrial revolution era, labour time became shortened and leisure time increased. This eventually led to a commercialisation of leisure, giving rise to a new society, commonly referred to as the 'consumer society' (Mandel 1970). This 'modern' society became characterised by dynamic commodity management and production. Commodification intensified with advertising techniques that constructed new 'needs', in association with lifestyle products, that would appeal to the citizen-consumer. The brands themselves became synonymous of lifestyle; their marketing, calculating worth 'external' to their use, promised the consumer 'added value' to their lives. At the heart of this expansive marketisation lay the advance of the commodity itself and an underlying theory of 'value'. To Karl Marx, who preceded much of this advance, something quite profound was discernible; a commodity is:

at first sight, a very trivial thing and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it [...]. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. (Marx 1999, 42)

In 'stepping forth', a commodity's value is realised in *exchange*. At this moment, added worth is bestowed to a commodity by the market, over and above its limited physical properties as an object and that worth is its exchange value.

The abstract quality Marx attributes to exchange value, he also describes as *transcendence* (referring to its 'enigmatic character'), because it is something that is not inherent to the object itself. The commodity has a symbolic, totemic sign value, referred to as religious fetishism, in which objects are invested with special, otherworldly significance (Marx, 1999, 43 and 44). In the moment of exchange, a material object acquires an immaterial substance, its abstract value, which, paradoxically, can be translated (as exchange value) into concrete cash. In this way, fetishism, far from being a false perception of reality or a superstitious belief, constitutes 'the way in which reality cannot but appear' (Balibar 2007, 61). This demonstrates that appearances produced by fetishism are not entirely false; they exist in reality. Nevertheless, appearances *do* conceal another feature of that reality; namely, the direct social relations between producers and consumers. Hence, as objects *produced*, commodities are 'invented condensations of social relations' (Mohamed 1995, 42). In exchange, too, commodities *produce* types of behaviour that encourage further consumption and production.

These critical insights illuminate contemporary discussions on *educational* commodification and exchange. Accordingly, they articulate a critique of the learning outcomes paradigm. The very notion of a 'captured' knowledge domain (or 'body of knowledge') is questionable, for instance.

Knowledge here is valued as objectified, measurable and transferable. Modularisation, by its very nature, atomises knowledge fields and limits learning arrangements temporally. Further, learning outcomes are interpreted as 'clear' bounded statements of 'what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process' (European Commission 2007, 15).

In quantitative terms, learning outcomes serve as a leading educational tool for describing but also, more significantly, prescribing expected learning; for informing as well as evaluating learners. In qualitative terms, learning outcomes are also 'prepared' to operate systemically as a key means for setting curriculum and assessment policy, as well as teaching and learning arrangements. However, it is in *exchange* where the purposeful, concrete, value of education is realised. At this moment, added worth (or 'exchange value') is bestowed to education by means of the market process. There is worth here for the 'provider' who presides over a valued skills service. There is worth too for the learner who accrues and exchanges valued transferable skills. As a constructed commodity, then, education signifies this strong social relations bond. Moreover, in *exchange*, the educational commodity produces types of behaviour that encourage further consumption and production. From a contemporary educational perspective, learning outcomes present and legitimate this transcendence. In these ways, learning outcomes exemplify educational commodification. This has far-reaching effects on the value attributed to education. Thus, in 'stepping forth' as a commodity, education becomes 'packaged' for exchange and 'product' value becomes transcendent.

Perhaps the greatest expression of transcendence is found in, what Marx has termed, 'real subsumption' in *all* areas of life. In the twentieth century, concerned observers of the ongoing socialisation of production highlight how commodity development even affects how we structure thought and how we regard the world. Lukács claims that commodification cannot be considered in isolation, or even regarded as the central problem in economics; rather alone, it remains 'the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects' (Lukács 1971, 83). In essence, commodification is *qualitatively* affective, capable of influencing 'the *total* outer and inner life of society' (Lukács 1971, 85); even to the point of stamping its imprint on *the entire consciousness of man (sic)*. This affective capacity is served by the principle of rationality; what is and *can be calculated*. Thus, when commodities are rationalised as 'useful' they acquire 'a new objectivity', and this, in turn, establishes subjective relations with those commodities. This is referred to as 'reification' and is commonly unquestioned as 'the timeless model' (Lukács 1971, 9).

Lukács establishes significant challenges for the contemporary educational paradigm. Specifically, the formal commodification of education can be viewed as *objectively* signifying a reduction of all social functions to its

elements. Comparable effects upon consciousness are also *subjectively* produced. In essence, learning outcomes, through their bureaucratisation and marketisation, imply the adjustment of one's social relations, mode of work/learning and, hence, of consciousness, to an economic empirical base. Education, and its value, is subjected to an increasingly formal, measurable and standardised treatment.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a case in point. Managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), this is an international standardised assessment administered to a random sample (of between 4500 and 10,000) 15 year olds in schools within each of the 30 member countries and their 30-plus 'partner economies' (OECD 2010). Financed exclusively through direct contributions from participating countries (through each country's education ministry), the programme focuses primarily on measuring student performance in reading, mathematics and science literacy. It attempts to do so by means of surveys administered every three years, comparing best practices across countries to develop individual school systems (OECD 2010). Educational emphasis is given to applied knowledge and skills, particularly relating school to 'real-life situations' (OECD 2010). In each test subject, the 'score' for each participating country is the average of all student scores in that country. This clear commodified form, so alluded to by Lukács, facilitates a 'comparative', country-by-country, educational standard that, in turn, seeks to impact, in a real sense, on individual/systemic 'ways of thinking and doing'. The economic sign value, so imbued in the commodification of education, is made even more 'real' when one considers that each PISA cycle has produced more than 10 OECD publications and a plethora of national reports in an area that 'covers roughly 90% of the world economy' (OECD 2010). Real systemic and practice-based changes emerge in: the establishment of assessment frameworks, particularly the 'testing' of reading, mathematics and science; the enhancement of performance indicators and monitoring/tracking systems; and focused attention on 'acquired', 'applied' competences and the priority of outcome-based forms of education. Significantly, PISA also represents a (supra-national) policy change force, one that governs and monitors a commodified educational agenda that, in the words of Angel Gurría (then OECD Secretary-General), 'sets ambitious goals for others' (OECD 2010, 3). Structurally, PISA fits within a coordinated OECD policy system of 'education indicators' that governs the quality of 'learning outcomes' and individuals'/systems' 'investment' in these. The World Bank's promotion of the global market economy, including the educational market economy, and the European Union's commitment to be the most competitive 'knowledge society' in the world (Schleicher 2006), remain consistent with such a vision. Crucially, as Robertson (2008) states, this shared vision promotes the liberalisation/privatisation of education services through the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services.

As education becomes subject to greater systemic, quantifiable, privatised and standardised arrangements, the teacher's labour-power, indeed his/her personality, is also reconstructed (although not necessarily determined) in such terms. Mutual links and developments between PISA and the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) appear to validate this combined change force. For the teacher, a real sense of personal/professional responsibility is regulated by the commodity construct. For the learner, too, education is objectified – its purpose befits ownership and utility in accordance with the promise of exchange value. This role division presupposes other social positions whose interests reside in producing and reproducing commodification structures. Thus, in addition to teachers and learners, the OECD view the PISA and TALIS programmes as important change forces at policy (e.g. government) and systemic (e.g. educational management) levels. Routinely, those occupying social positions therein may be acting independently of each other, what Lukács refers to as mutually interacting 'coincidences', or they may not even be 'fully and adequately knowable' (Lukács 1971). However, a seeming irrational system may be isolated in the most rational manner by 'specialists' (e.g. OECD appointed 'experts') who, by virtue of 'authoritative' standing, develop 'their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society (or that part of the society to which they belong)' (Lukács 1971, 17). In terms of teacher professionalism, then, the specialisation of skills secures a separation of 'managers from the managed'. In terms of learning, the specialisation of skills secures 'clear-cut' criteria, obscuring holistic images. Thus, learning outcomes, through 'a formally closed system of partial laws' (Lukács 1971, 17), present a type of 'policy science', as opposed to 'policy scholarship', approach to educational policy and practice (Grace 1995). Such a 'concrete' value system disregards (methodologically and in principle) 'the material base which it is its task to understand' (Lukács 1971, 18). In essence, its own concrete (economic) reality lies beyond its grasp.

If the relation between people and objects was changing, by the 1960s onwards, it had changed irrevocably. Lucien Goldmann, in the wake of Marx and Lukács, noted that society in post-war Europe had not only mutated into a manifestation of reification, but also forged the representation of the world as a spectacle. By then, Guy Debord (1967) had developed the idea of reification further, demonstrating how this itself is objectified through a regime of images. His term 'spectacle' pictures a complex concept: suggesting that what one is looking at is part of a show; a tableau that looks almost too good to be true. 'Spectacle' is a powerful metaphor for reification and all its consequences. In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles* where everything directly lived recedes into a representation. The spectacle is an inversion of living values into purely abstract values (Debord 1967, 35). It indicates the display of commodities, but one that has broken

out of the boundaries of advertising space and billboards, to infiltrate human consciousness and activity. Debord goes further, however. This spectacle produces a *pseudo-world*, produced by a juxtaposition of fragments of reality, and presented to the viewer as images. The spectacle does not equate with the images that convey it, nor can it be mistaken for an illusion (Debord 1967, 7). The spectacle is also a commodified world-view, 'both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production' (Debord 1967, 8). It is not 'a mere decoration added to the real world', but instead lies at 'the very heart of this real society's unreality' (Debord 1967, 8). Through the monopoly of appearances, it remains unchallenged and its only message is: 'what appears is good, what is good appears' (Debord 1967, 9–10).

From an educational perspective, Debord's work on the spectacle has much contemporary relevance, since it demonstrates how educational *processes* are increasingly signified (and thus obscured) by appearances. Moreover, in reality, 'the commodity form reduces everything to quantitative equivalence' (Debord 1967, 19). Accordingly, as education is ever more treated as a commodity, its quantitative equivalence, how it is measured and exchanged, becomes its defining feature. This occurs at the expense of other qualitative considerations that become secondary or marginal, such as: learning methodology; teacher–student relations; inventive curricular and assessment arrangements. Crucially, in appearance and reality, this paradigmatic shift signals the formation of a 'new' educational value system with *learning outcomes* serving as a leading didactic instrument. Even the language of the spectacle consists of signs of this concrete (economic) value system – 'signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that system' (Debord 1967, 8). This affirms appearances that produce *zeitgeist* educational meanings and schemata. In effect, the tautological nature of the spectacle 'stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical' (Debord 1967, 10). This language mode signifies the emergence of a particular technical rationality – a way of thinking and behaving in accordance with exchange value gain. For learners, there is the appearance of higher status credentials; for 'providers', there is the appearance of enhanced professionalism; for specialists, there is the appearance of 'expert' skills (Debord 1967, 11).

At the root of the spectacle is the age-old specialisation of power: when the fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity is stripped away, true relations between people and their classes may be revealed. However, this remains hidden. Moreover, the appearance is not the inevitable consequence of 'some natural technological development'; rather, the society of the spectacle 'is a form that chooses its own technological content' (Debord 1967, 13). This is because the spectacle is 'communicated' unilaterally. Thus, ideological governance structures, the dispersal of 'managerial consciousness', serves those administrators who preside over the existing system (Clarke and Newman 1997). Learning outcomes play their educational part.

Specifically, learning outcomes give the *appearance* of accountability and the *appearance* of performance assessment. Of course, learning outcomes *do* provide a measure of accountability and performance assessment. Crucially, however, this affirms a particular educational position, validating the primacy of economic value. Thus, the fetishism of the educational commodity is accomplished in the spectacle, whereby a regime of images (epitomising reality) unite with the promise of concrete exchange value. There is nothing contradictory here between idealised forms of representation (i.e. learning outcomes as 'sign') and concrete representative forms (i.e. learning outcomes as product exchange). As Debord puts it, 'the world we see is the world of the commodity' (Debord 1967, 21).

In this world, teacher labour becomes commodified, since it is the 'only creator of commodities' (Debord 1967, 23). Learning outcomes, in tandem with target setting and benchmarks, ensure that teacher labour is presented as technical/professional, accountable and assessable. Students too become spectators, 'consumers of illusions' (Debord 1967, 24), as learning outcomes are frequently written into culture in their absence. Thus, they are increasingly subjected to 'a counterfeit type of knowledge' (Long 2008, 124), where *acquiring* step-by-step knowledge supersedes more personalised, developmental, creative and critical 'ways of knowing' (O'Brien and Brancaleone 2011). Even the learning act itself is subjected to 'spectacular time' where human development is arrested by the immediate need for exchangeability (Debord 1967, 87). The omnipresence of learning outcomes across individual modules and course programmes signifies this ever-increasing packaging of 'spectacular time'. As educational consumption grows, time becomes 'spectacularly' encapsulated in the pursuit of expansive learning services and the knowledge industry is endorsed. This inevitably leads to increased privatisation (e.g. Hibernia College in Ireland) and performance-based comparisons amongst educational providers (e.g. the Russell group in the United Kingdom). Thus, the *appearance* of learning outcomes (via its messages of 'transparency', 'visibility', 'assess-ability') remains key to its concrete (economic) value for education. The media remains largely complicit in this education spectacle through an unproblematic acceptance of the learning outcomes message (for example, Mooney 2008, 16).

Learning outcomes as simulacrum

Debord's work shows how marketisation signals commodification through image and exchange. The relevance of spectacle theory to contemporary education consists of revealing image as the final *productive* form of commodity reification. From a *consumption* perspective, Jean Baudrillard develops Debord's thinking further in his work on the nature and dynamics of the consumer spectacle of signs. Baudrillard's early work emphasises consumption, not production, as the basis of the new social order, although he

recognises that the system of needs is shaped by the system of production (Horrocks and Jevtic 1997). Objects for consumption are presented not in accordance with their function but as ‘a calculus or network of signs’ (Horrocks and Jevtic 1997, 15). Baudrillard’s concept of *sign value* is ‘the status of objects as expressive symbols’ (Gottdiener 1994, 36). Here, sign value is something invisible and abstract, yet internalised by individuals who readily exchange money for it. Particular social groups consume particular products, and social difference is organised by this system of objects (Baudrillard 1968). Consumption, then, involves the manipulation of signs, the seduction of different social groupings (Horrocks and Jevtic 1997, 25).

Sign value, then, *denotes* use, but also *connotes* as a functional element of status, wealth or prestige (Horrocks and Jevtic 1997). Pierre Bourdieu’s work is significant in this regard because it offers socio-cultural explanations for why the educational field, a structured site of forces and struggles, operates unequally in accordance with different social groups’ access to economic, social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu 1977a, 1977b, 1997). Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ concept, in particular, enables a critical understanding of how some social groups are more capable of mobilising their own deeply held beliefs on the value of education. Thus, education’s sign value is *embodied* and moreover, for some social groups, the ‘need’ for education may be subjugated by the ‘need’ for educational difference – the desire for social meaning.

To what extent do *learning outcomes* organise social difference? In exemplifying a form of educational product, they remain silent on process and overlook education as a ‘lived’ socio-cultural experience. Also, their sign value promotes the usefulness of education and the prestige attached to higher (graded) levels of accreditation. Both of these value assumptions frame social opportunity and educational needs unproblematically, in terms of ‘upskilling’ potential. Thus, while learning outcomes ‘officially’ signify standardised access to higher forms of equity, a reality of ‘difference’ is obscured. Baudrillard’s and Bourdieu’s insights help to reclaim this reality, particularly the fact that social difference remains organised by a ‘differentiated’ education system. Thus, social difference is manifest in the varying levels of educational provision and their associative learning outcomes. This is exemplified by tiered accreditation levels set down by National Qualifications Authorities. Typically, lower qualification standards are attributed to Community Education courses (levels 1–3); middle benchmarks to further education programmes (levels 4–6); while higher education institutions signify the highest accreditation outcomes available (levels 7–10). As highlighted earlier, learning outcomes remain central to the objectives of National Qualifications Frameworks and systems for credit transfer and accumulation (Stocktaking Report 2007). They are defined in terms of whole programme output, as well as the product of an individual subject/course (e.g. modular outcomes). Despite the strategic promotion of ‘transferring’/

'upskilling' a knowledge base, learning outcomes appear to facilitate fairness, when they may embrace values that promote hierarchical forms of 'exchange' mobility and an expansive educational consumption ('accreditation inflation'). Crucially, what remains hidden is the question of *who* gets access to educational opportunities. In reality, those already advantaged (economically, socially, culturally and symbolically) are better able to 'upskill' – in Bourdieuan terms, capital accumulation, not redistribution, is likely to prevail. In response to the above question, learning outcomes may not be decisively responsible for social difference and the extent to which learning outcomes are a cause and/or effect of social difference remains debatable. Nevertheless, learning outcomes fail to make visible (thus failing to challenge) real difference. The *sign* of learning outcomes, then, promises more than its *substance*.

Thus, the sign value of learning outcomes may reflect a different reality. This may not be obvious, which is why critical educational perspectives are often marginalised. Perhaps this is understandable, since what is *real* is becoming ever more obfuscated by image. Baudrillard's later work illuminates this point (1973, 1981). He paints a picture of contemporary society in which consumer images have become more real ('hyperreal') than physical reality and in which simulations of reality ('simulacra') have replaced their originals. Baudrillard's view of western consumer society revived a classical concept (*eidolon*) originally applied by Plato to a visual representation, notably an image likeness – a similarity to the object of representation, but also a conceptual representation in which words are used to stand for an idea. The 'original' is the idea, the copy its image. Baudrillard's distinction demonstrates how the relation between image and object can range from a mirror-like reflection of a basic reality, to a concealment of the absence of a reality, or even something that bears no relation to it. In Baudrillard's elaboration, the semiotics of signifier and signified breaks down. Baudrillard thus concentrates on the sign for an object and how it can deviate from the meaning usually attached to it. As he sees it, the sign develops its own autonomy from the real, through signalling an illusory appearance, rather than denoting a concrete object. In his postmodern discussion about objects and their representation, he argues that there are representations that have no referent; that is, they are not just false images, but images that denote no real. The disparity can be so great that the representation ends up being nothing more than an illusion, a counterfeit.¹

Baudrillard's interpretation of the impact of technological change concentrates on the spectacle of images of the consumer world, a mediated world of signs and simulations that refer to nothing other than to each other, a world characterised by hyperreality: 'this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1981, 12–13). His analysis enables us to see that simulation is a crisis of representation, 'the catastrophic effect of the loss

of that distance proper to representation' (Butler, Elliott, and Ray 2003, 35). Of course, it may be argued that all representations can, in the words of Baudrillard, 'neutralize the meaning and energy of events' (1994, 53). Going further, however, he claims that while there may be more representations and more information in the world, this actually produces less and less meaning (Baudrillard 1994, 79). This is because while appearances seduce, they simultaneously deflect from reality and meaning. This speaks to a more serious problem of representation, demonstrating that the sign can construct the real as simulation. Moreover, Baudrillard claims that the greater the circulation of the sign, the greater its domination – to the point of replacing the real. What we end up with is more real than the real. With this endless dislocation from the referent, the very concept of *meaning* is at stake.

This presents a serious challenge to the learning outcomes paradigm. As we have noted, learning outcomes signify instrumentality, concreted as they are in representations of practical exchange. Moreover, their 'assessable' nature exemplifies their concrete value; learning 'outcomes', literally, stand for educational product. But product, as signified by the learning outcomes paradigm, may deflect from its real, *educational*, meaning. This is where Baudrillard's insights into simulacrum are critical in challenging authoritative claims to representation, and, in particular, Baudrillard's treatment of the sign (in this paper, the signified form of learning outcomes) as a discursive 'hyperreal' relation. Baudrillard enables us to make the case for *image* to be examined more closely, even privileged to a significant degree, in correspondence to its relational object. Thus, a closer critical examination of the sign of learning outcomes reveals significant paradoxical effects. On the one hand, learning outcomes mirror and produce a spectacle of images of the consumer world. On the other hand, their sign can still be expressively removed from an *educational* referent. Hence, in claiming to represent (literally) the outcomes of learning, their sign may, in effect, be re-representing the *real value of education* (including its real learning outcomes). Thus, a crisis of representation may emerge at the very moment when learning outcomes' image creates a new (un)reality. The power of the sign manifests itself in this *productive* redrawing of reality boundaries.

In terms of educational meaning, then, learning outcomes may, at one (economically concrete) level, make real sense; at another (more critical educational) level, they may make no real sense. Indeed, at a third level, they may only make real sense on their own. These levels may sometimes coalesce and may be real at different times to different people. This illustrates the 'floating' nature of the sign of learning outcomes. Thus, in the most concrete of ways, one may characterise learning outcomes alongside an *a priori* body of scientific knowledge to be 'received' by learners. Indeed, by placing emphasis on what the learner will be able to do, learn-

ing outcomes betray a skills bias that confers on education a direct form of exchange value, commodifying learning into goods for sale on the open market, as capital (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 388). In this logic 'the notion of skill is presented as an instrumentation of the notion of employability, redefined as the sum of skills accumulated by a given wage-earner' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 386). At a more critical educational level, this characterisation may demonstrate learning outcomes as no more than a technical, 'decontextualised' form of educational product (Wells 1998; Meadows 1998). Here, the sign of learning outcomes may confuse pedagogical concerns with (economic) skills-based values more attuned to industrial and commercial criteria (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 465). At another level still, learning outcomes may be officially written into culture (e.g. organisational development plans, teacher schemes, course outlines, etc.), but only become reified as bureaucratic and/or strategic tasks (e.g. learning outcomes applied 'for their own sake'/'without buy in', technically 'used' to demonstrate/justify 'productivity'/'professionalism', etc.). Of course, such reification may affirm concrete economic values – one does not need to be cognisant of such values to put them into effect. However, such reification is most likely to betray dislocation – in so far as learning outcomes become dislocated from an *educational* meaning. Finally, through such reification, learning outcomes no longer resemble reality; belying their title, they cannot possibly capture the product of *education*, the outcomes of *learning*.

Conclusion: the economic and ethical impact of educational commodification

Conceptually (and concretely), learning outcomes are valued precisely because they are measurable. There is a privileging here of quantitative, at the expense of genuinely qualitative, educational substance. Learning outcomes may constitute an illusory promise, which is set within the very real context of a neoliberal drive towards educational commodification. Neoliberalism stems from the ideas of Frederick Hayek of the Vienna Circle, popularised by Milton Friedman in 1962; in practice, the term refers to the pervasive influence of the so-called Washington Consensus, a network comprising the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the US Treasury Department, the World Trade Organisation and the European Central Bank. The Washington Consensus actively lobbies for privatisation, free trade, growth based on exports, financial capital mobility, deregulated labour markets and austerity policies (Palley 2005, 25). The neoliberal agenda has extended to how society should be organised, because its market logic includes the notion of an 'enterprise society' (Turner 2008, 131).

Neoliberal strategies target education, as part of a radical reorganisation of society to emulate a marketplace. The main influence has been an on-going process of marketisation which, in the case of higher education, involves 'restructuring its form and content according to market models. While only some forms of marketization turn education into a commodity, they all impose accountancy criteria for valuing education and its human products' (Levidow 2005, 161). Even at European level, neoliberalism is enshrined in economic policy across European Union member states, through fiscal restructuring and reducing the role of the state (Milios 2005, 210). In the United Kingdom, the marketising of higher education unfolds through the reduction of student–teacher contact, pressure to increase student numbers, shifting resources from teaching to research, while keeping staff levels unchanged. Marketisation takes the form of: 'ideological language, funding priorities, public-private partnerships, tuition fees, cost-benefit analysis, performance indicators, curriculum changes, new technology' (Levidow 2005, 161). The 'internationalisation' of such marketised forms is now well established. The recent Hunt Report (2010), which sets out a draft national strategy for higher education in Ireland, is a case in point.

The ethical effects of marketisation are stark. As appearances (and their realities) are unveiled, there is an impending need to challenge the very real threat of, what we call, educational dislocation. Dislocation signals the serious loss of the intrinsic worth of things that, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, 'begins with their transformation into values or commodities' (Arendt cited in Meade 1996, 117). Ethical values – the very signifiers of moral order – likewise become subject to the law of demand and are targeted, desired, normalised and measured. Scientific and ethical questions emerge from the falsity of simulacra – the world of 'copies, likenesses and appearances' (Plato 1997, 260c). In the same dialogue, Plato goes on to explain, by making the clear distinction between 'likeness-making' and 'appearance-making': 'Let's recall that one part of copy-making is likeness-making. The other kind was going to be appearance-making, if falsity appeared to be true falsity and by nature one of those that are' (Plato, 1997, 266e). In light of these questions, this paper calls on educational providers to revisit the value concept of learning outcomes and critically reflect on their *learning* substance. There is need, too, for members of the educational community to deconstruct and re-engage with *real* educational values and ideals. This is not easy, since values themselves are powerfully constructed and administered. Moreover, they remain hidden, implicitly embodied and concreted in versions of reality that are obscured by image and policy-making. While this does not foreclose the possibility of change in personal/professional values, it highlights the intentional need for criticality and action.

Our research on the European context for the advocacy, and now implementation, of learning outcomes shows just how embedded they are in policy. The dynamic of the Bologna Process reveals the unquestioned adoption

of the market model of education and mirrors the railroading of the neoliberal agenda and inscription into economic policy across the European Union since the 1990s. This situation continues despite the recent signs and consequences of 'market failure'. What remains particularly worrying is that market policy has extended its sphere of influence, in direct and indirect ways, to all other areas of society, including education. While civil society is being rapidly reshaped by marketised principles, we side with the post-Bourdieuian sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello who do not take a fatalist or determinist view of the all-pervasive imposition of marketisation on society (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 22–24 and 104–163). It is certainly possible to overcome the polarity of 'civil' versus 'market' society, through a renewed, post-1968, critique of the impact of policy-making in education. This critique of the learning outcomes paradigm, of its impact on the quality of education, seeks to do just that.

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Note

1. Such a postmodern view reflects Gilles Deleuze's influential approach to the simulacrum, which rejects Plato's ethical stance that the copy is inferior to the original and is, in certain cases, untruthful, arguing instead that the simulacrum is legitimate in itself: 'Overturning Platonism, then, means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections' (Deleuze 2004, 80).

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