

Academic Accreditation and the Postmodern Condition: A Critical Analysis of Practices in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

As an admissions officer at a public university, I rely on institutional accreditation. Accreditation involves itself in the postmodern condition in both the rejection of a metanarrative (e.g., the assumption that some institutions are inherently better than others) and the commodification of knowledge. Although there is a risk that accreditation may come to form a metanarrative and produce a hierarchy of its own, it can be seen as indicative of the positive nature of the postmodern condition: a force that seeks to dismantle metanarratives of totality and supposed authority. This it does by allowing previously unrepresented institutions to be heard and valued.

Keywords: accreditation, metanarratives, Lyotard, postmodernism, post-secondary education

In my role as a university admissions officer, I am regularly confronted by assumptions of quality among post-secondary institutions. In order to assess quality, admissions officers often rely on institutional accreditation to determine the acceptability of a student's academic background and their suitability for continued or advanced study. This reliance on accreditation as a measurement of quality is typical of the postmodern condition, as admissions officers tend to reject the notion that all educational practices are alike in scope and rigour. Accreditation also involves itself in the postmodern condition in both the rejection of a metanarrative and the commodification of knowledge.

Although there is a risk that accreditation may come to form a metanarrative of its own, it can be seen as indicative of the positive nature of the postmodern condition: a force that seeks to dismantle metanarratives of totality and supposed authority. We

draw on Klein's (1995) concept of the metanarrative as a totalizing discourse and consider Lyotard's (1991) position on postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives, as well as Giroux's (1988) view of postmodern practice as one that attempts to reframe the limits enforced by these metanarratives. We must also consider how education is commodified by accreditation, which seeks to evaluate and judge the quality of an institution's practices and administration. My aim is to demonstrate how accreditation can be situated within a postmodern context: how it disrupts metanarratives of educational superiority and assumptions of quality, how it democratizes post-secondary education, and how it plays a role in the commodification of education and degree credentials.

To begin this analysis of the postmodern nature of accreditation, one must first explore the concepts of quality that it professes to evaluate. In my experience, the definition of quality in a post-secondary environment can have many interpretations. To students, their families, and the community, quality involves the expectation that the educational experience offered is worthwhile. An understanding also exists that the time and effort students put into their studies, as well as the personal and public contributions to the institution (in the form of tuition and government funding), adequately reflect the perceived worth of the institution's educational practices. There is also an expectation that the graduate will emerge with a recognized degree or diploma credential and be able to secure gainful employment. From an institutional perspective, I would argue that quality refers more to the academic rigour of the classes and training offered. It also refers to the institution's integrity and participation in research and inquiry. Quality relates to the value of scholarly activities, and includes—but is not limited to—teaching. As we shall see, accreditation tends to promote a view of quality as the institution's ability to meet or exceed minimum standards and expectations in terms of administration and organizational direction. What is common to all these interpretations, however, is the relation they have to a metanarrative of authority that persists in the academic environment. It is precisely this metanarrative that accreditation seeks to subvert and democratize.

"I define *postmodern*," says Lyotard (1991), "as incredulity towards metanarratives" (p. xxiv). I think this statement typifies the postmodern condition: a refusal to accept foundational thought as the master discourse (Aronowitz, 1987) or the metanarratives Lyotard describes. There is a notion that the metanarrative can tend toward totalitarianism (Klein, 1995), and, certainly, a foundational set of "truths" may be experienced as such. Lyotard describes metanarratives through example, suggesting that they may include grand narratives of the creation of wealth or the emancipation of the rational subject, and notes that they "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture of question" (p. 23). Giroux (1992), responding to Lyotard, describes the

attack on metanarratives as “a trenchant form of social criticism and a philosophical challenge to all forms of foundationalism that deny the historical, the normative, and the contingent” (p. 52). Postmodernism, he says, is a politics of representation, reacting to metanarratives that reduce historical experience and diversity into a flattened and all-encompassing totality. How, then, does a condition that rejects metanarratives react within the context of postsecondary accreditation? It is the rejection of a totalizing view of the authority of the academy. It is also a rejection of the metanarrative that describes universities as the sole repositories of knowledge and research: a denial of their seeming inviolable right to declare their practice of education as superior, or rigorous to the exclusion of all others, and beyond reproach. This rejection is embodied by institutional accreditation.

To understand this we must examine what accreditation is, and how it is used as a tool to assess the quality of a particular institution. In doing so, we can understand how accreditation fits within the postmodern condition. Accreditation in North America is a process in which institutions engage to receive public funds and to encourage enrolment (Council for Higher Education and Accreditation, 2008); it is voluntary in nature (Collins, 1979; Dill, 1999; Holmes & Hooper; Miller & Boswell, 1979; Van Damme, 2000; Young et al., 1983). In the United States, it is a non-governmental practice, with regional accrediting agencies overseeing assessments of local institutions (Young et al., 1983). In Canada, accreditation involves provincial legislation combined with membership in a national advocacy group (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2005) to form a system of validation. Accrediting agencies in the United States are validated by national associations (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation is referred to as “a process of external quality review created and used... to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (p. 3). An institution's ability to claim accreditation indicates that minimum standards for quality have been met (Eaton, 2006). Accrediting agencies establish guidelines to evaluate institutional quality, and communicate these guidelines as expectations and standards. A post-secondary institution wishing to gain accreditation must demonstrate an ability to meet or exceed these standards (pp. 6-7). Standards can vary, but generally they follow the same set of guiding principles and expectations: 1) that a school has legal authority to operate in its area, 2) that it possesses sufficient financial resources, 3) that it is governed by a board of directors and a chief executive officer, 4) that it operates with a clearly defined mission, 5) that it offers programs of study leading to degree or diploma credentials, 6) that it has access to adequate library resources, 7) that it has administrative support for its needs, 8) that it plans and develops policy intended to support and expand the mission, and, finally, 9) that it enrolls students and establishes admission criteria (Council for Higher Education and Accreditation, 2006, 2008; Middle

States Commission on Higher Education, 2006; New England Association of Schools & Colleges, 2005; North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 2003; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, 2003; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2005; Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2008). A review of the six major regional accrediting agencies in the United States (the Middle States Commission, New England Association, North Central Association, Northwest Commission, Southern Association, and Western Association) reveals these common themes. All describe the process of review and evaluation, and a rationale for such a review to take place: primarily as a voluntary practice to assure the public of adherence to established expectations, and therefore the institution's integrity. Accreditation is part of the postmodern condition as it critically evaluates the concept of institutional worth without responding to assumed worth.

But how do we take accreditation to be an example of the postmodern condition? The answer, I believe, lies in the concept of metanarratives, and the role accreditation plays in undermining them and in rewriting the notions of authority. In my professional experience, a narrative of educational authority exists. Indeed, it is alive and well. It is a notion of assumed supremacy in university education, which is built upon the historical institution of the academy. If we assume that accreditation is symptomatic—or representative—of a postmodern condition, we must ask what it is that accreditation rejects, and what it seeks to achieve. I am mindful of Giroux's (1992) commentary on postmodernism, as he notes that it

calls into question the use of reason in the service of power, the role of intellectuals who speak through authority invested in a science of truth and history, and forms of leadership that demand unification and consensus within centrally administrated chains of command. (p. 53)

The university situates itself comfortably within a historical context, with roots reaching back to the days of the medieval schools. Assume, then, that the university has achieved the ability to speak for itself, and that it demands unification and consensus within societal narratives. It is the sole true proprietor of higher education and has a privileged role as a producer of knowledge and research. Giroux (1988) describes a modernist view of education as providing the “socializing processes and legitimating codes by which the grand narrative of progress and human development can be passed onto future generations” (p. 5). It would be reasonable to expand this concept to the university, which chooses to privilege itself as a provider of knowledge and education. In doing so, we see how the university forms a part of the metanarrative of authority. It legitimates itself as part of the narrative, by building structures of authority and control: the right to

offer degrees and autonomy to determine its own mission and how students are educated.

Consider accreditation, then: an external process of review to which the university must submit. To achieve accreditation, the institution must present itself for scrutiny, and, in doing so, it must submit to the examinations of the accrediting agency and then present evidence to show that standards are met. Once accredited, the institution must also agree to periodic review (Eaton, 2006), which implies a loss of some of the autonomy previously enjoyed. Certainly, the voluntary aspect of accreditation allows the university to retain some of its authority, but accreditation is meant to prove institutional quality and thereby influence the perceptions of the community at large.

Giroux (1988) notes that postmodernism deterritorializes and redraws social, political, and cultural boundaries, and accreditation would seem to achieve this. Accreditation shifts the focus away from the metanarrative of authority built upon historical context, drawing new boundaries to define “quality” education. This may take the form of accreditation for private colleges, vocational training, distance education, and online education. All forms present a minority voice in the narrative of educational authority as they are underrepresented in the traditional view of education as promulgated by the traditional voice of the university. When “alternative” modes of education gain accreditation, the traditional metanarrative of educational authority is undermined; the old gives way as boundaries and borders are redrawn and remapped. This can help to redefine the concept of authority (Giroux, 1988) as accreditation questions the traditional forms of education and what may be legitimized. If metanarratives are “universal guiding principles and mythologies which once seemed to control, delimit, and interpret all the diverse forms of discursive activity in the world...” (Connor, 1997, p. 52), the goal of postmodernism is to “stress the equalization and levelling out of symbolic hierarchies, antifoundationalism and a general impulse towards cultural declassification” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 65). We might infer, then, that accreditation is part of that impulse because it seeks to disrupt the assumed authority of the university's role in creating a mythology of excellence without qualification. In this way, accreditation may be seen as part of the postmodern condition. Accreditation redraws boundaries set down by the old metanarratives of education and authority as it scrutinizes established institutions and provides representation for the new, and this is essentially a positive move.

There is an aspect to accreditation that may be seen to further the commodification of education as part of the postmodern condition. Consumerism and commodification are products of postmodernism, and the postmodern age is characterized by both (Bloland, 1995). Metanarratives are the foundation of universities, as they are shaped by the institution's assumptions about progress, knowledge, and socialization (Bloland,

1995), and the postmodern condition seeks to disrupt this. As such, consumerism is highly disruptive to post-secondary education because it calls into question the assumption that universities have a monopoly on knowledge (p. 540). Lyotard (1991) notes that “knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange” (p. 4). He continues to stress that “[k]nowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps *the* major—stake in the worldwide competition for power” (p. 5). Lyotard acknowledges that learning—and, we may infer, education—may circulate just as money does, and that units of knowledge may be exchanged within economies. To what extent, then, does accreditation involve itself in the commodification of education and, by extension, knowledge? The answer lies, I think, in the value placed upon the degree credential.

I have already established accreditation as a process of evaluation and valuation. The determination of the value can be used to assure students (and potential employers) of the value and worth of their degree credential (Eaton, 2006). Students are greatly concerned with earning a degree credential, and view it as a means to gain employment:

A degree can also be a passport out of an underclass, or a safety trap to prevent its holder from sinking into an underclass. Without it, as North American high school students are forever being warned, they will be doomed to a work life of “flipping hamburgers.” With it, all manner of opportunities may be accessible. (Jacobs, 2005, p. 45)

This tendency to view education and academic credentials as units of knowledge promotes the view that they are products that can be purchased, sold, or traded (Lincoln, 1998). This can be reflected in students’ attitudes: they view themselves as purchasers of an education leading to a degree credential. Accreditation’s most important function, it would seem, is to validate the degrees awarded by an institution, and provide assurances of the competencies of the individual who holds the degree (Miller & Boswell, 1979). Students, in the guise of consumers, use accreditation to measure the presumed quality of programs and also to differentiate types of education available between institutions (Hooper & Hooper, 2000, p. 250). Accreditation as a process helps these “consumers” determine the value and worth of an institution’s educational practices, and they use this information to determine how they will “invest” in higher education. Accreditation may not be directly responsible for the commodification of education, but it does seem to play a contributing role. In this sense,

we might argue that accreditation shares in the postmodern condition of commodification and consumerism.

There is, of course, a danger in accreditation: that it may begin to form a metanarrative of its own. Inasmuch as accreditation can be seen to disrupt the hierarchy inherent in post-secondary education, it can also be seen to offer a hierarchy of its own. When we consider the question of commodification, we must consider the danger of losing sight of values and plurality (Jackson, 1999). Tension exists between the academic and commercial needs for knowledge (Häyrynen-Alesto & Peltola, 2006), and, possibly, quality assurance can create homogenization (Germain & Veitenheimer, 2008). Might this lead to the creation of a new “metanarrative accreditation,” which presumes its own authority? Accreditation could seek to homogenize the representative voices of education and universities as it could choose to shut out minority voices (Giroux, 1988) that should be represented in a postmodern climate.

In fact, the origins of accreditation can be found in institutional recognition and an initial claim to a metanarrative of supremacy, and not quality assurance (Van Damme, 2000). Could this be seen as an attempt to legitimate a metanarrative? It would seem that accreditation is quickly approaching a point where it may seek to prove that it has the sole ability to confer a value-based statement on the worth of a university and exert control. This is precisely the kind of metanarrative that it has previously sought to prevent: “[o]stensibly the aim of quality assurance may well be to improve a service provision but in reality it is a subtle form of panoptic power, control and surveillance over the academic process” (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005, p. 96).

We have seen that metanarratives reach toward a voice that can be totalitarian, as they reject a plurality of voices and experiences in favour of the one represented as truth (Giroux, 1988). Accreditation can be seen to promote a new hierarchy: one in which institutions are valued according to the accreditation they hold (Holmes & Hooper, 2000), and in which unaccredited institutions do not have a voice. In enforcing a set of standards, accreditation possesses the ability to demand that institutions conform to a narrative of universality—something that a postmodern condition would reject. The characteristics of accrediting agencies—self-regulating communities with exclusive privileges to admit, evaluate, and discipline members without the involvement of outsiders (Collins, 1979)—help them form their own metanarrative, and they create their own universal guiding principles (Connor, 1997). In effect, this is their own mythology of being. This, then, is the danger of accreditation: that it may fall away from postmodernism and instead reinforce a universal view of what constitutes quality.

Thinking about this question of metanarratives and accreditation, and my work in undergraduate admissions, I am left to ponder whether the postmodern condition is a positive influence or a negative one. Students have an incredible number of

postsecondary options—colleges, both private and public; denominational schools; vocational training; and private and public universities. Accreditation is involved with all these modes of education, and, too often, the institutional view of what constitutes quality is lost in the metanarratives of educational authority that deny, for example, the potential equivalence of a technical writing course at a vocational college and the technical communications seminar offered by a university. Nor do we have much opportunity to consider the question of life experience, for accreditation pertains only to the institution, and not to the individual. True, universities are working to develop new standards of prior learning assessment (Athabasca University, 2008), but the role of this assessment in the wider scheme of accreditation is uncertain.

On the other hand, accreditation can and does lead to the expansion of educational opportunities and the availability of transfer agreements between institutions: as more institutions seek and gain accreditation, both the academy and the community at large come to recognize the value of the credentials offered. Accreditation therefore allows a plurality of educational experiences and practices to be legitimated. Accreditation offers non-traditional institutions the opportunity to prove their worth, by breaking down the metanarrative that denied them the right to “speak” before postmodernism, and to democratize the field of post-secondary education. It would be reasonable, then, to conclude that the postmodern condition, as seen in the process of accreditation, is generally a positive one.

I have discussed how accreditation finds its place in the postmodern condition: primarily as a means to disrupt the old metanarrative of universities. Accreditation can reject metanarratives that value university education over all others by subjecting them to scrutiny, and by offering previously undervalued institutions—colleges and vocational institutions, for example—representation. Accreditation may be seen as part of the postmodern condition by the way it can come to commodify education—by validating the worth of a degree credential. Although there is a risk that accreditation may form a metanarrative of its own and that commodification may move toward homogenization, accreditation continues to present the postmodern condition in a relatively positive light. This it does through the democratization of post-secondary education, which allows for previously unrepresented institutions to be heard and properly valued. In reflecting on my own experiences with accreditation and my notions of educational legitimacy, I am troubled because I am forced to consider my role in reinforcing old hierarchies of authority. I think that critical analysis and self-reflection ought to be required of all admission officers, for it could have revolutionary results.

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