# The customer *isn't* always right: Limitations of "Customer Service" Approaches to Education Or Why Higher Ed is Not Burger King

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**Abstract** The increasingly popular trend of conceptualizing education in terms of "customer service" is, in some ways, attractive. It encourages educators to think in terms of meeting students' needs and to develop innovative ways to deliver their "product." In other ways, however, it fails to convey the essential collaborative, participatory, reciprocal relationship that is central to effective teaching and learning. With respect to academic integrity, the customer service model also obscures students' roles and responsibilities. In this paper, we will identify some of the ways this model—in which the customer expresses a need and the vendor meets that need in exchange for payment—provides an inappropriate metaphor for understanding the project of teaching and learning (i.e., education). When embraced uncritically, the model has the potential both to undermine education and at the same time derail efforts to develop and sustain a culture of integrity. After identifying this model's shortcomings, we will suggest ways to develop and promote a more robust model in which faculty and students work together toward a shared purpose while recognizing and embracing their interlocking responsibilities.

**Key Ideas**

- In the "customer service" model of education, students increasingly expect to be *given* what they have paid for rather than working actively with faculty to achieve a common goal.
- This model's presupposition that responsibility for students' education rests solely with the faculty who "deliver" it is at odds with effective academic integrity practice which requires that students play an active part in their own education.
- Recognizing and resisting the customer service model is necessary, for reasons relating to both academic integrity and the educational enterprise itself.

**Discussion Question 1** To what extent are students' unexamined assumptions about education being a commercial exchange already affecting academic integrity efforts?

**Discussion Question 2** Given that students already assume this model, how might we change that perception?

## Customer service as a conceptual model for education

There are many reasons why customer service has become increasingly popular as a way to conceptualize higher education. Indeed, some features that recommend it are compelling: We *should* strive to be responsive to student needs in much the same way that businesses try to anticipate and meet the demands of the market. We *must* compete for the best students in a way that is similar to businesses competing for customers. Accordingly, we have indeed come to recognize the benefits of advertizing, marketing ourselves, and inspiring "brand loyalty." Additionally, whether we like it or not, because of decreasing public funding, higher education is increasingly subject to market forces. In fact, for public universities at least, the ability to carry out the mission often calls for entrepreneurial activity aimed at making universities self-sustaining financially. So too, we know that we must respond swiftly and intelligently to trends in order to remain on the cutting edge and be able to offer the latest and greatest in courses, facilities, and approaches. At the same time, however, we must be cognizant of the ways in which what we do in higher education differs from commerce. Similarities can be pressed too hard, and when they are, what looked to be sheer gain can end up being an unbalanced and infelicitous mix.

## A reexamination

Sometimes it is helpful to think in a new way, to see things differently, because, *inter alia*, things that were not seen or appreciated previously come into view, perhaps revealing new possibilities/approaches that hold great promise for success in an undertaking. In a complex multi-faceted undertaking, however, one has to be careful not to adopt an explanatory schema uncritically; what works very well with one facet of the operation—in the sense of revealing new possibilities and approaches, for example—may be unhelpful or counterproductive in another. It is important to recognize the limitations inherent in each approach—the ways in which the analogy (in this case, the analogy of customer service to teaching and learning) falls short. Failing to do so can limit the potential usefulness of the approach, and frustrate the operation as the new way of thinking meets with resistance from practitioners better positioned to see and anticipate problems than administrators or managers who work some distance from the trenches.

There is another reason for care in the choice of how to see and talk about things. How we conceptualize an undertaking can shape our choices and actions. We can see the need for caution in the business arena, where people have been encouraged to think of business as war, a money making machine, a race, or a game; to believe that Machiavelli and Attila the Hun are good managerial role models; and to see all business people as entrepreneurs, for example. Discussing these ways of thinking about business, each of which must be rejected, because (first) they *misrepresent* business, Robert Solomon puts the key point forcefully:

> How we talk reflects how we think, and how we think affects how we act and the nature of the organizations and institutions we create for ourselves. If we talk like brutes and we think like brutes, we will act like brutes and build organizations suitable only for brutes. To be sure, even in such organizations, some people will prosper, but life for most of them will be nasty, brutish and short.[1]

The key point bears repetition. There is a connection between the way we talk and the way we think; the way we think influences our actions, including those involved in the creation, maintenance, functioning and success of the institutions we work in. Indeed, this point is presupposed when ideas such as those Solomon rigorously and decisively critiques are put forward. Trouble is, these ways of thinking about business (that Solomon debunks) are, in fact, pernicious. Our point is softer than Solomon's, since, as we shall see, the customer service model has some felicitous applications in colleges and universities. The same cannot be said of the suggestion that Attila the Hun is a good managerial role model. Still, like Solomon, we have two main points: (1) the way we are asked to think about higher education does not accurately represent the relationship at the heart of the enterprise of teaching and learning, that is, the relationship between teacher and student and (2) because of this it frustrates the maintenance, functioning and success of the enterprise and, not incidentally, our efforts to promote academic integrity. We will argue, therefore, that we should not use customer service terms to conceptualize education because, as Kenneth Burke points out, "the nature of our terms affect[s] the nature of our observations"[2]. Choosing a set of terms, therefore, is significant, because in choosing, one highlights some aspects of the thing described and obscures others. "[By] its very nature as a terminology, it must be a selection of reality"[3] Put more simply, the way we talk about what we do matters in part because it affects how we think about it.

## Customer Service

The customer service model, which has its roots in the total quality movement that started with William Edwards Deming,[4] has been aggressively promoted in higher education. The idea that has been pressed is that an embrace of this model is imperative, "given the fact that in order to be effective organizations must be customer-driven,"[5] or, alternatively, the model must be embraced because "even the best organization in the world will be ineffective if the focus on 'customers' is lost."[6] Resisters are told that properly understood the model is "generally applicable to all kinds of organizations"; moreover, "[e]veryone of us is a customer. Everyone of us serves customers."[7] Those of us who resist thinking of our students as customers are told to "wake up and smell the coffee," and stop thinking that there is something special about higher education.[8]

> Managerial principles applied in commercial service organisations and other public-sector service organisations, such as health trusts, hospitals. and local councils, are just as relevant in a higher education context. Managerialism is universal and, as Ritzer (1996) suggests, consumers in universities require the same standardisation, reliability and predictability as they do when purchasing a burger meal or dealing with their bank.[9]

Interestingly, the extraordinary and tortured efforts to salvage the notion that students are customers reveal much of what's wrong with pressing the idea in the academy, or more precisely, in the arena of teaching and learning. The extent to which the definition of "customers" must be stretched to include students illustrates the significant differences in the two groups.

Part of the confusion stems from a conflation of educational and business functions within universities. Clearly, there are customer service functions within institutions. Entities such as student housing (analogous to other real estate), food services (analogous to restaurants), and even some functions of bursar's offices (analogous to banks) may or should be run with an eye toward customer service. When it comes to the education of students, however, the goals, functions, practices and relationships are different from what one finds in commercial undertakings.

Commercial enterprises provide goods or services in a way that allows them to "make a profit, i.e., to obtain some value in excess of what [it] had before the exchange which is sufficiently flexible that it can be put to uses other than the immediate satisfaction [of the] needs and desires" of the provider.[10] With an eye to achieving this two-fold purpose a commercial enterprise will set itself to attracting customers who will buy—and continue to buy—its product or service. In the case of a product, there is a transfer or exchange of ownership and the provider's holdings of the product that has been exchanged are diminished; the business needs to make more widgets.

It's fair to say that the educational enterprise is supposed to deliver something—knowledge—which will then be "owned" by the student. But while commercial enterprises can (and often do) measure success in terms of repeat business, in education one measure of success is that the student "gets" the "product" the first time and need not come back a second time; repeating a course represents failure—a bad thing—rather than "brand loyalty"—a good thing. The point can be seen from the other side as well: a brewery, for example, wants its customers to keep buying beer. That customers would learn to brew beer for themselves and thus reduce their reliance on the brewery runs contrary to the business model. Further, the transfer of knowledge that occurs in education does not diminish the provider's holdings and prompt the provider to produce more. To be sure, educators are interested in and strive to increase knowledge, but what's going on here is quite unlike the situation in business where, for example, having delivered widgets to many customers, more will have to be made in order to have a supply adequate to meet demand. Moreover, the delivery of knowledge does not entail a *change* of ownership—instead, it is an extension of ownership; the educator still "owns" the knowledge that has been given to the student—it has simply been shared; the student's acquisition of knowledge does not diminish in any way the educator's supply.

One aspect of "return business," of course, is customer satisfaction. This is a commonplace familiar to most people from the old saying that "the customer is always right." Where market forces operate, the buyer is right in this sense: it is not in the interest of the seller to question or criticize the customer's views since doing so would quite likely thwart his effort to make a sale.[11] In commercial transactions, then, and in the ordinary understanding of the term, customers are the ultimate arbiters of quality, which is, of course, the linchpin of customer satisfaction. It is evident that advocates of the customer service model in higher education recognize the obvious problem here in thinking of students as customers, yet they insist on using the word 'customer'. For example, Maguad writes, "The term customer can be defined as the recipient or beneficiary of the outputs of work efforts or the purchaser of products and services."[12] That this definition would have us calling those persons whose wartime deaths are called collateral damage, as well as the victims of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, customers does not slow him down. Without missing a beat he writes, "Students are appropriately viewed as customers in the sense that they are beneficiaries with needs that should be satisfied. This view does not imply that they are the ultimate arbiters of quality in the commercial sense."[13] Later in the same article he lists several other ways in which students, though properly seen as customers, "differ from your typical business customers."[14] They are, he says, "admit[ted] selectively based on certain academic standards and requirements," they are sometimes "prevent[ed] ...from purchasing ...[higher education] products and services," and "often do not totally pay for the full cost of their tuition and fees." Further, once admitted students "are continually tested and graded"; moreover, they "must maintain their good academic standing in order to be able to take more advanced courses and complete their programs of study."[15] Would we be mistaken to suggest that by this account students are customers only in a Pickwickian sense? Perhaps it would be more politic to say it is a highly theoretical sense. Either way, the problem is the same. Those who hear the term take it not in a Pickwickian or theoretical sense, but in its ordinary sense, i.e., the sense in which the term is most commonly used. More than one student has said, during the advising meetings in which they choose courses to fulfill university requirements, that they don't understand why they are required to take courses that they have no interest in. "I'm paying for the courses—why can't I choose the ones that I want?" When seen through the lens of a customer, this seems a perfectly reasonable expectation whereas when seen through the lens of a student, the expectation that curricular choices are exclusively theirs seems far less apt. To return to Burke, we find that the use of particular terms directs our attention. In this case, we suggest that the use of customer service terminology often misdirects.

A second way that the educational enterprise differs significantly from commerce emerges when we consider the relationship between functions and constraints. While the market is free to respond to trends, whims, and fancy, and to deliver whatever product seems attractive at the time, the *raison d'etre* of education is much more narrowly defined. We have one primary function, which although responsive to the greater world, and flexible in some measure, remains relatively constant: we educate. It will never (and should never) be the case that the secondary services we provide (food, housing, transportation, banking, and athletic spectacle/entertainment, for example) become primary, regardless of how popular or financially profitable they become. To be sure, education is not immune to market forces. However, the action-reaction nexus in education is not the same as in business. In education, mere market demand is not enough to justify a change in course. Put another way, whereas consumer markets can respond to wants, even wants that are arbitrary or manufactured, educators are obliged to meet needs, even when those needs are unrecognized by those who have them. Knowledge and truth are not market commodities in the way that pork bellies and petroleum are; recall the earlier point about how delivery does not diminish the supply. Our professional roles and our institutional charters both dictate that we recognize educational needs and attempt to meet them.

The third and perhaps the most obvious way that education differs from commercial enterprises has to do with their practices, and more specifically, who engages in them. In commercial exchanges, the terms of the exchange usually specify that the customer gives something (usually money) in exchange for goods or services which the purveyor is then obliged to provide. It is an exchange so familiar that we take it for granted—I pay, you provide. In education, however, although payment is made the "product" can never be successfully "delivered" unless the student participates actively. An education can not be had unless the person being educated is engaged in the process. Lessons can be given, but learning remains the responsibility of the learner. The practice of education is, then, necessarily cooperative; it is not a simple exchange of services for pay. It is more like what most people would readily recognize as professional practice than it is like business practice, the customer service model's suggestion to the contrary notwithstanding.

## Professional practice

The practice of clinical psychology is another example of a profession where cooperative engagement is required to bring about the desired outcome. Here, in order to be successful, a client must work with a therapist to bring about a desired result. Although the professional guides the process, it is the client who must do the work and the client's progress (not the work of the professional) is the ultimate measure of success. It is worth noting, in this connection, that in the practice of clinical psychology a professional must sometimes reject a request made by the client/consumer because, in the therapist's professional judgment, the client's needs would not be well served; so too in education, where the client/consumer does not always have the requisite knowledge to know what is needed. Much the same thing could be said of physicians, attorneys, and architects, i.e., professionals.

As sociologist Everett C. Hughes notes, "'[p]rofession' originally meant the act or fact of professing. It has come to mean: 'The skilled occupation that one professes to be skilled in and to follow'." The implications are significant. For the present purpose, this is key: because they profess, Hughes continues, professionals ask to be trusted. The rule with professional practice, he says, is *credat emptor* (i.e., buyer give credence to, trust). The reason for this is that, in general, because they lack the expertise of the professional they have come to, nonprofessionals are not in a position to evaluate their judgments, advice, and performance; in short, they must trust them. This rule, *credat emptor* distinguishes the professional relation from the relation of vendor-vendee found in markets where, as is well known, the rule is *caveat emptor* (buyer beware).[16] All of this suggests what we believe to be quite true, namely, that looking to professional practice for help in understanding the educational enterprise holds considerably more promise than looking to business practice.

Lastly but perhaps most significantly, the relationship between student and teacher is very different from that of vendor and vendee, i.e., customer. In the case of the latter, the relationship exists to facilitate a transaction or transactions. The vendor hopes to maintain the relationship as long as possible in order to continue to amass transactions (and therefore continue to amass profits). In the former case, the goal is focused upon the improvement of the student, and the goal is similar to that of a parent—to reach a point where continued interactions, though they may be welcome indeed, are unnecessary. Continued interaction is then by choice rather than necessity.

## Vendor --- Vendee, i.e., Customer

The relationship between vendor and vendee is a dyadic relation: xSy "x sells to y" (alternatively yBx "y buys from x"). The relation is a simple one: a transaction/exchange in which a good or service is exchanged for money. The relation is not entirely balanced as the obligation to perform rests almost completely with the vendor. Apart from a failure to pay, it would be unusual, at least, if the vendor were to claim that he had been wronged by the customer. The seller needs to attend to the needs of the customer in a way that the customer does not and needn't match—it's a sparse rather than a rich reciprocal relation.

## Teacher ---- Learner

The relationship between teacher and learner is also a dyadic relation: xTy "x teaches y" (alternatively yLx "y learns from x"). The upshot of the relation is not, however, mere exchange: the relation creates or produces something (education) rather than transferring something. There is another difference between this relation and that of vendor and customer: in this case the expectations which, if thwarted, lead to complaints of wrongdoing—that one party has been wronged—are found on both sides. This is a rich reciprocal relation. It's here that one finds the moral nub of academic integrity; it's intrinsic to the enterprise of education, the heart of which is the relationship between teacher and learner. One seeming complication is that in contemporary higher education students work with and rely on their peers in making the most of collaborative learning environments and opportunities. Yet, in a very real sense, in these learning situations they, i.e., the students, are in it together and something akin to the relationship between teacher and learner obtains among all those involved in the teaching and learning experience creating a nexus of (potentially) beneficial reciprocal relations. Nothing like this occurs with customers; customers aren't "in it together"; indeed in some cases (think Christmas toy shopping or online auctions) they are competing with one another.

Still, the customer model does direct us to things that need attention. For instance, the model reveals how important it is for teachers to be aware of the needs and abilities of students (learning styles and so on too). That's part of its attractiveness, perhaps even its intuitive appeal. Trouble is, it also (wrongly) positions students as passive rather than active participants in the process. In a customer-service model, there is no expectation that they will be contributing partners in what is in fact a necessarily participatory process (of teaching and learning). This model, as it is commonly understood, dictates that apart from wanting what the other seems positioned to provide, and paying to effect a transfer of it, there's nothing for the student to do. If we are guided by these understandings, we face two very unpalatable consequences: (1) Success in the educative enterprise becomes less likely and (2) The interactive reciprocity of the enterprise becomes obscured, thereby diminishing the significance (or the salience) of academic integrity.

As we have seen, there are several reasons for rejecting the language and practices of customer service in education, but perhaps the most important is this: In most customer service environments, the responsibility of customers is limited to articulating their needs and paying for the goods or services that are produced in response. Even though there are a number of businesses that refer to their customers as "partners," there are very few for whom the responsibility for what is produced is truly a shared concern.

## An Alternative Model

A good place to start in developing an alternative to the customer service model is the idea, discussed briefly above, that there is much to be gained in looking to professional practice. In fact, starting here promises forward progress on two fronts: (1) in our understanding of the educational enterprise and (2) in seeing new and promising ways to promote academic integrity. By returning to the idea that education is, in fact, a professional rather than customer service concern, we will

focus attention more properly on the practices, essential goals, functions, and relationships that are most central to teaching and learning.
Practices comprise norms that prescribe or proscribe certain acts as well as norms that specify roles and functions; the accountability of those responsible for discharging these functions is largely, though not completely, a matter of compliance with these norms. Legal philosopher Lon Fuller puts the point succinctly; practices include both "a vocabulary of deeds and a basic grammar."[17] The norms of a practice constitute a set of internal principles that, in fact, make the practice possible, in the sense of creating the capacity to achieve its purpose(s).

Fuller's idea about the norms internal to a practice, which we are adapting here, emerges in a story he tells about a hapless King Rex who fails as a lawmaker in eight distinguishable ways. The lesson we learn, according to Fuller, is that law-makers will fail to make law unless they comply with principles internal to the legal enterprise. The eight principles of the legal enterprise require laws to be 1) general, 2) promulgated, 3) typically prospective, not retroactive, 4) clear—that is, readily intelligible. Laws must also be such that the acts they require are 5) neither incompatible nor 6) impossible to perform. Moreover, 7) laws must not be changed too frequently, and finally, 8) there must be a congruence between the rules as declared and the rules as administered. As Fuller has it, these eight principles constitute the morality that "makes law possible." Put another way, these norms are key elements in an explanation of how lawmaking is possible, in particular, of how the legal enterprise can achieve the purpose of making behaviors *normatively* non-optional, in a word, obligatory.

Fuller can speak for himself:

> Certainly there can be no rational ground for asserting that a man can have a moral obligation to obey a legal rule that does not exist, or is kept secret from him, or that came into existence only after he had acted, or was unintelligible, or was contradicted by another rule of the same system, or commanded the impossible, or changed every minute. It may not be impossible for a man to obey a rule that is disregarded by those charged with its administration, but at some point obedience becomes futile—as futile, in fact, as casting a vote that will never be counted. As the sociologist Simmel has observed, there is a kind of reciprocity between government and the citizen with respect to the observance of rules.[18]

The "principle of reciprocity" is a key element in Fuller's account of law's capacity to obligate. Indeed, as Fuller has it, "the notion of reciprocity [is] implicit in the very notion of duty—at least in the case of every duty that runs toward society or toward another responsible human being."[19] Thus, a complete rupture of the "bond of reciprocity" between government and citizen leaves nothing "on which to ground the citizen's duty to observe the rules."[20] Fuller maintains, rightly we believe, that the principle of reciprocity "has roots…in our professions [and] in our practices."[21] In some cases, he says, "it is obvious to those affected by it; [in others] it traces a more subtle and obscure course through the institutions and practices of society."[22]

Returning to the idea that norms internal to a practice explain its ability to achieve its purpose(s), it may be helpful to consider a simpler case than lawmaking. The practice of casting ballots involves a settled and stable expectation that a vote cast for candidate A will be counted as a vote for candidate A. The principle here, that votes should (must) be faithfully counted, is intrinsic to the practice of voting or elections. Both the meaning of a voter's participation in an election and the successful functioning of the practice depend on compliance with it.[23]

Again, the key idea of the approach we advocate in developing an alternative to the customer service model is the idea that the capacity of a practice or enterprise to achieve its purpose depends on compliance with a set of internal principles. Fuller puts the idea another way, and as we shall see, it resonates deeply with our suggestion that by returning to the idea that education is, in fact, a professional rather than customer service concern and focusing attention on the essential practices, goals, functions, and relationships that are most central to teaching and learning we will be able to see new and promising ways to promote academic integrity. What he says is this: an enterprise such as legislation or election, for example, "[has] an integrity of [its] own which must be respected if [it is] to be effective at all."[24]

Let's apply this idea to the academy and ask what is required if the educational enterprise of higher education is to achieve its purpose(s): Please take a moment to think about this and then write down what you have come up with. Please do this before reading further. Really....

Here's a provisional response to the question "What is required if the educational enterprise of higher education is to achieve its purpose(s)?"

- Honest reports and representations
- Transparency/openness rather than secretiveness
- Trust, which is the foundation of reasonable reliance
- Accountability, on an individual as well as institutional level
- Recognition of limits
- Respect (but not deference) for established authority and innovation
- A mechanism for attribution and citation that creates an accurate "trail" of ideas and findings; this is necessary for several purposes including
    - Giving credit where credit is due
    - Knowing where an investigator/writer/thinker made a wrong turn
    - Knowing where to go to find out more—to continue and enhance the inquiry
    - Honoring rights in ideas (intellectual property)
- A sense of community and common purpose that can keep the competitive drive of individuals on a short leash.

What we have here are ideas/norms implicit in the educational enterprise that are essential elements in the collection of things necessary for successful teaching and learning. It's not surprising that they might just as well be referred to as elements of academic integrity in the Fullerian sense that the academy "[has] an integrity of [its] own which must be respected if [it is] to be effective at all." Moreover, the reciprocity implicit in them seems to confirm the idea, stressed earlier, that the success of the educational enterprise depends on the efforts of those being "served" at least as much as it depends on the efforts of those providing the "service." The suggestion that we will make in closing (since making the full dress case is beyond the scope of our project here) is that seeing the principles of academic integrity in this way should make it easier for students to (1) understand *why* those of us who have made our careers in the academy expect, in fact, demand compliance with them and (2) come to "own" them and see them as constraints one accepts voluntarily when one becomes a participant in the enterprise of higher education.

## Conclusion

We believe that an alternative to the customer service model should speak straightforwardly rather than in a Pickwickian fashion. The model we prefer relies on the mores of professional practice, highlights the reciprocal dimensions of teaching and learning, and articulates the principles that are central to the enterprise of education. This model would be *person* centered (speaking of women and men, students and teachers rather than resource inputs and outputs, for example) in that (1) the goal is the betterment of *people* rather than the delivery of a product or service and (2) it would be clear that the central mission of higher education is teaching and learning. Emphasizing the human dimension would promote the development of a sense of *community, commitment, and care* revealing the ethical heart of academic integrity and thereby positioning educators to help prepare students to be women and men of integrity after they leave the academy.

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## Endnotes

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[19] MOL 21.

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[21] MOL 21.

[22] MOL 22.

[23] PSO 92, 91.

[24] PSO 180.