

Defining Innovation - The Future of Academic Innovation

Politicization

Run Time - 3:29

To dig into the history of the term innovation shows a concept wielded not to clearly define a sort of product or process, but instead a signifier to evoke an emotional response. For most of the 2,500 years since innovation was first deployed that emotional response was negative; innovation was a pejorative and to be labeled an innovator or innovative was to be insulted (Godin, 2015)

During the trial of King Charles I in the 17th Century, both the English parliament and King Charles labeled one another as innovators. In part due to his branding as an innovator, Charles was beheaded in 1649, and the label of his reign as innovative anchor the histories of the time.

Only over the last 150 years has innovation had a positive connotation, and just within the last several generations has innovation become a superlative. Here innovation as a non-concept remains the same (Waxman, 2012) and it is only the emotional response when using the word that has undergone transformation. Innovation the product, or the process, or the mindset are secondary to the evocative positive reaction to the word.

In late 2017 US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos met with pollster Frank Luntz to discuss rebranding her reform agenda (Hefling & Emma, 2018). Historically a proponent of charter schools as a primary mechanism for K-12 reform, Secretary DeVos was initially taken aback by the negative reaction to her confirmation and leadership in ED. In discussing language, Luntz suggested Secretary DeVos pivot away from using terms such as 'school choice' because of their cultural and social histories, instead referring to her platform as one of innovation. There has been no change to the material within Secretary DeVos' agenda, only the language used for messaging.

This is not to say in the United States that politicization of innovation is a partisan issue, Republican or Democrat. Former US President Barack Obama regularly called for innovation across sectors of the United States economy, and within education linked the opportunities of innovation alongside an entrepreneurial spirit that potentially alleviated the need of collegiate study for high school graduates, where people would learn skills and trades in lieu of pursuing degrees in art history (Obama, 2014).

The use of innovation from politicians such as Secretary DeVos and President Obama is not to clarify a point of operation within public or private policy, but to align

a technological solutionism and Yankee ingenuity to the ideological whims of the ruling party.

“Innovation is one of those words like apple pie. No one is against it,” according to Columbia Teachers’ College Professor Priscilla Wohlstetter. It rallies people around you. It doesn’t isolate or alienate anyone.”