

The Effects of One-Dimensional Reasoning on Vocational Education:  
What if Marcuse went to NSCC?

Debra G. Wells-Hopey

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	Page 2
Abstract.....	Page 3
Chapter One: Introduction.....	Page 4
Critical Thinking.....	Page 7
The Road Ahead.....	Page 10
Chapter Two: The Evolution of NSCC	
History of Vocational Learning in Nova Scotia.....	Page 12
Chapter Three: NSCC an Overview.....	Page 20
Chapter Four: One-Dimensional Thinking	
Marcuse’s Theory of One-Dimensional Thinking.....	Page 25
NSCC as an Exemplar of One Dimensional-Thought.....	Page 30
Chapter Five: What is Damaged in the Act of One-Dimensional Thinking?.....	Page 35
An Evolution of Instrumentalization.....	Page 36
Critical Thought in Jeopardy.....	Page 37
Impacts of One-Dimensional Thought on NSCC Students.....	Page 39
Threats of Agency.....	Page 41
In Summary.....	Page 43
Chapter Six: Critiques of Marcuse’s Theory of One-Dimensionality.....	Page 45
Chapter Seven: Conclusion and a Way Forward.....	Page 53
Why the Humanities.....	Page 57
A Need for Intolerance.....	Page 58

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## Abstract

This thesis will argue that NSCC is an ideological construct that is part of a larger apparatus of administered domination. Such a claim is highly contentious, yet I will seek to show that any critique of the college is, a-priori, designed to be unacceptable by the same administrative environment in which the college exists. This paper shall draw upon Herbert Marcuse's theory of One-dimensional reasoning to illustrate why NSCC is a manifestation of oppression, and how this is a result of a technologically administered society that represses the act of critical thinking. I assert that when reason is no longer critical, it inhibits the ability to think in terms of abstracts or universals (justice, freedom, equality, etc.) and becomes only a tool for attainment of ends and, therefore, is a threat to learner's agency. If there is no room, a priori, for critical thought at NSCC, what are they in truth doing there? And what does this mean for those who "choose" to attend? In short, I will initially critique the college in light of its adherence to one-dimensional reasoning, show why this is threat to agency, examine critiques that challenge this theory and, finally, attempt to reconcile these tensions.

## Chapter One

*"It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."*

-Aristotle

### Introduction

As an instructor at a private career college, and later at Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC), I found there to be a point in the teaching process each year where it became necessary to teach my students Plato's Cave Theory. Was it part of the official curriculum? Definitely not. Did I see it as a useful way to teach my students that they were perhaps unknowingly influenced by a number of factors that impede their perceptions and affect their attitude? Yes. The theory was generally understood and eagerly absorbed by the learners. Some of these students had previous post-secondary education, while others were classified as mature students who had been out of school for quite a while. Some were there as part of a re-training, government-funded, back to work initiative. Most were looking for an expeditious, practical education that would be their gateway to the workforce. They were there to learn the skills necessary to obtain a diploma, and, subsequently, gainful employment.

Somewhere along the way, I intuited that the learner's success, both academically and occupationally, would necessitate, or at the minimum be enhanced by, the learning of a section of Plato's Republic, along with some other "oldies-but-goodies" such as game theory's Prisoner's Dilemma, a survey class on competing ethical theories, feminist theory and a few other schools of thought that I saw as conducive to learning topics in the curriculum as well as understanding the world at large. I attribute the importance I placed on learning these concepts to my educational background in philosophy, as it certainly has coloured the way I dissect information and interpret what I learn. However, it seemed that there was more to it. I eventually recognized that these

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

students did not necessarily have to learn philosophical theory to better understand what they were learning – it was just the way in which I specifically learned how to process information. They just as well could have been assisted by interpreting the information through the lens of economic theory, or political theory, or through literature or art. Regardless, I began to form the belief that “real” learning is not possible without a foundational structure upon which to critique that which is being taught. In short, these students needed to learn how to think critically.

Due to the nature of the school in which they were enrolled, these learners were tasked with skill acquisition, vocabulary memorization and the like. It was not required of them to critically analyze the information presented. If they had instead taken a liberal arts or a humanities degree, they would perhaps have a richer basis upon which to build their learning. But they did not go to university for a variety of reasons, some by choice, others because they were unable to due to a lack of prerequisites, time constraints or economic barriers. Why should they have had to? Why wasn't critical thought deemed important enough to teach at a vocational level?

These experiences led me down a path of thinking about the differences between a university humanities education and vocational environments. Eventually, I was inspired to enroll in the Masters of Life Long Learning at Mount Saint Vincent University, where I began to think intensely about the commodification of learning – and ultimately came to the realization that the learning of certain things in certain environments can be considered subversive indeed. Soon after enrolling in the MA, I became an instructor for Halifax Humanities 101, a program that offers university-level educational courses in the liberal arts to adults living on low incomes. Here my misgivings about the lack of criticality in vocational environments became amplified as I saw the positive effects such teachings had on HH101 students. Eventually I came to believe that, as long as education is the tool of economic, political and social forces, full participation and the ability to learn

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

deeply, express autonomy and make changes to alleviate the forces that work against liberation is highly problematic.

There are long standing and deeply entrenched notions and societal techniques that have an adverse effect not only the education system, but on claims to agency and, as a result, one's ability to participate fully in society and to make meaningful changes. The current educational climate of austerity, practicality, and "job-readiness", particularly in the vocational realm, succeeds in keeping people from autonomous choice, emancipatory learning and ultimately has an effect on freedom. I claim that "the way out" of political, social and economic barriers is through self empowerment, achieved as a result of an education that encourages self-reflection and critical thought- enabling autonomy and a full rational life.

More often than not, vocational environments impede this process. To support this assertion, I shall look to various philosophers, particularly Herbert Marcuse, who focus on critical thinking, liberty and the results of a society administered by instrumental reasoning. For the purpose of this thesis, NSCC will serve as an exemplar for vocational education as I investigate how the school is problematic to an individual's freedom, agency and ability to make an authentic choice. As will be argued, NSCC is a model of how instrumental reasoning and an administered society have resulted in education which only perpetuates a cycle of using human capital in a way that impedes autonomy.

### **Critical Thinking**

As the following thesis will show, critical thinking has been seized upon and distorted by a "force" that has constructed a false reality; a life built on a mimicry of truth, one so insidious and satisfying that it is, for the most part, unidentifiable – undetectable in its control and pervasiveness. The questioning of assumptions is not enough, and not truly critical, if we are misled and unable to

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

see fully the truth of what there is to question. It becomes an act of unrecognized futility – an examination of what we believe to be reality (which in fact is not) which can only lead us so far; but not far enough, I shall suggest, to enact change or to claim autonomy of thought and action. It is not the case that NSCC does not place importance on critical thinking, it is that the school knows it to be *too important* to teach.

For Herbert Marcuse, critical thinking is “negative thinking” – a recognition, and ultimately a rejection, of what is held to be (mistakenly) a true reality. One must think their way out of the erroneous perceptions of what is presented as reality in order to see the authentic world. In Marcuse’s view, critical thinking entails the ability to escape the physical, positivist truths of false reality and reach a level of abstract thought that allows for conceiving of actual truths. The given reality, detected through observation and “common sense” is impervious to critical thought unless such thought is a negation of this level of reality, obtained through an illuminated perspective that lies outside of what is normally considered “real”. Only then can one see truth in such a way to be able to critique and enact change. Marcuse calls this “the great refusal,” which is to recognise and then challenge oppression, as “all liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude” (p. 7). Often, the refusal to conform to the common-sense perception of reality appears “neurotic” as the irrational appears wholly and completely rational. Marcuse asserts, “In the contemporary period, the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of reason...to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible” (p. 9).

For Marcuse, this is no accident. Our modern industrial society has become an administered one, a technologically sophisticated apparatus of domination. In this way, it becomes increasingly difficult, to a point of near impossibility, for one to comprehend the world in any other way. It can only be through negative thinking that one can catch a glimpse of true reason. Unfortunately, most

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

are caught up in a world conceived of only through a one-dimensional lens, as “the efficiency of the system blunts the individual’s recognition that it contains no facts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 11). Yet, for Marcuse, there is another dimension: the recognition and ability to envisage the world *outside* of the administered life. But it is one-dimensional thinking which maintains the status quo. How can one escape when there is no realization that there is somewhere to escape to?

If it is the case that an imperceptible, administered society keeps individuals in a state of false liberty, unable to utilize anything but one-dimensional thought, what does this mean for learners? And specific to this thesis, to vocational learning? The following pages will examine the impact of instrumental reasoning on vocational learning, drawing upon Marcuse’s critique to argue that NSCC deploys instrumental reasoning in forming its teaching and learning practices, and that these practices are antithetical to student’s ability to exercise critical thought, and, as such, are a threat to their agency. I will reveal NSCC to be an ideological construct that is part of a larger apparatus of administered domination. Such a claim is highly contentious, yet I will show how any critique of the college is, a-priori, designed to be unacceptable by the same administrative environment in which the college exists.

In *The Power of Critical Theory* (2005), Brookfield states, “At the core of Marcuse’s work is his belief that we learn our own servitude and that we have learned to love our condition of oppression” (p. 188). I will look to Marcuse to illustrate why NSCC is a manifestation of such oppression, and how this oppression is a result of a technologically administered society that, among other things, has created and feeds “false needs.” These deceptive needs have been used to maintain a repressive social order – resulting in the production and consumption of bogus necessities and

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

actions encouraged by the previously mentioned “force,” namely the capitalist social order, to maintain dominance.

The assertion that NSCC is a repressive tool of corporate and capitalist interests and is thus antithetical to learner’s claims of agency would appear to many as reactionary, or even politically irresponsible. After all, NSCC seeks to grow the economy through offering programs that train and educate individuals to ready them for the workforce – to lift them up out of personal economic constraints and make a better, more lucrative and successful climate for us all. To this, I would counter that the students and the public who support the college (which encompasses the majority of people) are in fact experiencing a repression – as “needs are created by the dominant capitalist order and then internalized...so that we define ourselves, and the attainment of a fulfilled life, in terms of these needs” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 188).

Negative thinking (or critical thinking) is necessary to identify the ideological forces at play – to determine that the needs (or educational path) which one appears to have chosen freely are actually the needs of dominating interests. If indeed it is intrinsically instrumental, it would be a paradox were NSCC to teach critical thought. Yet, when reason is no longer related to thinking about abstracts or universals (justice, freedom, equality, etc.) and becomes only a tool for attainment of ends, instrumental reasoning threatens agency and autonomy. By definition, it appears impossible that critical (or negative thought) is compatible with the system that is NSCC. This is the tension I shall examine. If there is no logical room for critical thought at NSCC, what is in truth going on within its walls? And what does this mean for those who “choose” to attend NSCC? What would Marcuse think of this institution?

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

### **The Road Ahead**

This thesis will employ the use of critical theory as its methodology, drawing upon it to dismantle and examine NSCC's programming and mission, specifically making use of Marcuse's theory of instrumental rationality. The result will expose the inherent contradictions in the current community college model. This will provide a framework from which I will attempt to rebuild an altered conceptualization of the purpose and function of NSCC, one which softens the lines between critical (or two-dimensional/negative) thought and vocational learning in an attempt to counter the effects of technological rationality, including threats to the learner's agency.

Starting with Chapter Two, I will provide an overview of the historical context in which NSCC evolved. Next, I will examine the basis upon which NSCC anchors its educational practices, laying bare the nature of the discourses that justify the various educational practices of the institution. Chapter Four will be an analysis of Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality and an introduction to the argument that the foundations upon which NSCC practices is governed and is funded is an example of one-dimensional thinking. In turn, Chapter Five will examine in what ways Marcuse's critique of one-dimensional thinking can provide a new way in which to view NSCC's justificatory ideology, that is so say, examine what or who is harmed by the notion that NSCC is one-dimensional in its processes. Here the argument will expose the consequences of this ideology on the thinking processes and hence the agency of students. Chapter Six will assess and compare Marcuse against potential responses and counter-critiques of his theory. The final chapter will seek to offer ways in which the paper's critique of NSCC can point a way forward for transforming vocational learning at NSCC.

## Chapter Two

*“Our memory of struggle to be included in circles of learning may provide the inspiration and energy we need to counter profoundly anti-democratic tendencies...”*

-Michael Welton, 2013

### The Evolution of NSCC

#### History of Vocational Learning in Nova Scotia

To proceed with the assertion that NSCC is inherently characterized by an instrumental, one-dimensional underpinning, it is necessary to examine the roots of the school's origin. The following will be a chronological survey of some of the occurrences (social, political and economic) which have culminated in the expression of the institution as it is currently recognized. This chapter shall provide a descriptive record of the history of vocational education in Nova Scotia largely retrieved from a definitive, but little known, text by George MacDonald (1986). I will also draw from a variety of other sources, marking the significant changes that, particularly over the last century, had an influence on vocational learning in Nova Scotia. Due to space and time constraints this historical review consists of a generalized examination of the earliest manifestations of what would eventually develop into NSCC. The following narrative of vocational learning in Nova Scotia will not seek to relate historical events to the present argument, but rather offer a chronological timeline of occurrences. This information will be used later in this thesis as evidence of the basis upon which NSCC anchors and justifies its educational practices.

According to Welton (2013), the beginnings of organized education in Canada can be traced to the “Age of Improvement”, between 1760 and 1880, when the industrial and scientific revolutions prompted an interest in knowledge, spurring a society that takes an interest in the public sphere. It was a time when “all learning is being harnessed to transform Canadians into industrial

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

workers with industrialized minds” (p. 23). The scholar also identifies the subsequent “Age of the Great Transformation”, between 1880 and 1929, as harsh industrial capitalist production led to public dissatisfaction with working conditions and social stratification, resulting in something new: social movements which would “mobilize under a banner of “knowledge for the people” [and] open space for public deliberation” (p. 24). Education at this point was beginning to be viewed as a goal for all people, including rural farm workers, miners, fishers, factory workers and women. It was also seen as the answer to anemic employment rates and a remedy for the need for more highly skilled workers. Below are some specific historical occurrences which coincided with the social awakenings of which Welton refers, which eventually contributed to the establishment of NSCC.

As MacDonald (1986) maintains, the Free School Act of 1864 laid the foundations for the public school system in Nova Scotia. Prior to this, education was largely the responsibility of the household, with the exception of the wealthy who sent their children abroad for formal education. In the early 1800s there were some instances of schools for the poor administered through various churches, however these “continued to run along as a charitable and private matter; the results of it were dismal” (Landry, 2011, para. 9). MacDonald describes the passing of the Nova Scotia Free School Act, the first public education system in Canada, as ensuring a basic education would be free for parents, with the cost of running the school to be paid through voluntary subsidizing and financial support from the government of Nova Scotia.

It was less than a decade later, in 1872, when the beginnings of organized vocational education in Nova Scotia were established with the erecting of the Halifax Marine School. The institute, now the Nova Scotia Nautical Institute, still exists and has been part of the NSCC system of education since 1988 (Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.). Shortly after the establishment of the Halifax Marine School, the Provincial Legislature appointed a lecturer on agriculture to the Provincial

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Normal School in Truro to encourage agricultural education. This is now the School of Agriculture, a part of Dalhousie University. The year following, according to MacDonald, the Mining School was opened which would eventually evolve into the Nova Scotia Technical University of Nova Scotia, also now a part of Dalhousie University. At this time, Nova Scotia's mining and engineering education was administered by the Department of Mines, until the province became the first in Canada to establish system of technical education in 1907. Besides establishing a technical college for university training in engineering, this system also included part-time, local, evening technical schools in the principal towns and cities as well as coal mining and engineering schools in colliery centres (MacDonald, 1986, p.25).

During the early 1900s, as Welton (2013) observes, "Our learning infrastructure had grown more complex from the age of improvement" (p. 25). Workers wanted both technical and general information, but also, employers wanted and needed workers who were knowledgeable about their field, particularly as industrialization led to more complex production techniques. Nova Scotia was the first province to organize a program of vocational education of less than college level, and with the passing of the Technical Education Act of 1907, centralized control of all technical or vocational education was given to the province (Crawford, 1927 para. 5).

World War I brought with it its own challenges which influenced vocational education in Nova Scotia. During the war, much of the technical education offered by the province had dwindled as local men enlisted in the effort. However, in 1915, the federal Military Hospital Commission encouraged Frederick Sexton, Director of Technical Education in Nova Scotia from 1907 to 1947 (who is often referred to as the "father of Vocational training in Nova Scotia"), to provide retraining programs for wounded soldiers returning from the war. According to Guildford (1987) the veteran soldiers were separated into two categories, those who were learning for therapeutic reasons and

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

those who were retraining because disabilities prevented them from returning to their previous occupations. Guildford states, “this division makes explicit the attitude that vocational training was intended to heal the whole person, not simply to provide the technical skills and scientific principles required for specific occupations” (p. 77).

By 1920, evening classes were held in twenty-eight Nova Scotian municipalities to provide vocational instruction for approximately 2,400 pupils who were divided into either technical classes or coal mining classes (Crawford, 1927, para. 25). Also, according to MacDonald, the Glace Bay School Board had approved day-time vocational programs in the public schools. The principles of technical education, as per an education report during that time, indicated that:

Industrial education would fail in its mission if it trained boys and girls to be efficient producers only. Industrial education should also develop habits of economy, independence, originality, accuracy, fair-play and order, and a keen civil and social conscience among its students (MacDonald, 1986, p. 26).

Over all, however, adult-centered technical education was not progressing. The Nova Scotia economy was struggling greatly, as “in the spring and summer of 1920 the bubble of wartime prosperity collapsed and every industry in the province was affected” (Guildford, 1987, p. 80). Factories were shuttered and unemployment was rampant. Further, as Macdonald explains, contentions were apparent between the two levels of government during this period concerning the balance between provincial autonomy in education provision and federal control over funding and expenditure. To add to the tension, the passing of the federal Act for the Promotion of Technical Education in 1919 declared that “the Federal government had the right to assess and examine, at any time, the curriculums, learning materials, qualifications of teachers and facilities of the province’s technical education system” (Guildford, 1987, p. 79). As MacDonald relays, a quarterly report would

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

have to be submitted by the province, outlining all expenditures. In return, the Federal government would share up to fifty per cent of the costs for technical education. Frictions aside, this funding allowed Nova Scotia to offer courses in technical and engineering fields, correspondence courses and continuing industrial education courses held in the evenings.

With the 1930s came the phenomena of corporate involvement in vocational education. In the mid 1930s, Halifax Shipyard Ltd., the Naval Dockyard, Imperial Oil Ltd., and Moirs Ltd. established co-operative classes for industrial apprentices through which workers would attend classes for two half-days each week (MacDonald, 1986, p. 27). This program existed in some form or another until the early 1990s and was held at the Nova Scotia Institute of Technology. This was a precursor to the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency (NSAA) which presently operates under the authority of the Apprenticeship and Trades Qualifications Act and is in partnership with NSCC (NSAA website, 2017). Per MacDonald, the late 1930s also saw increasing concern regarding youth unemployment. This resulted in the provision of government funds for the training of those between 18 and 30 years of age in agricultural education, land surveying and automotive mechanics. In 1939 a federally-funded Youth Training Act was established but shortly after, with the onset of World War II, this Act was replaced by War Emergency Training, under which training was provided in those skills which aided in the war effort. The War Emergency Program was later renamed the Canadian Vocational Training program (MacDonald, 1986, p. 28). At the time, Sexton (1941), observed:

Trade training has emerged as a fearful urgency for our successful effort in a war. During the long depression youths were not prepared for productive jobs but were left to deteriorate in corking idleness. All while the ranks of skilled labour were being depleted by death, retirement, and other factors, to the extent of four or five per cent annually (p. 610).

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

During the post war years in the late 1940s, a fisheries training program was established, making use of mobile facilities providing instruction in both technical skills and basic education. Later, in 1950, the Fisheries Training Centre was established in Pictou, while courses were still offered elsewhere in the province (MacDonald, 1986, p. 29).

1960 saw the passing of the Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act which, according to Goad (1965), was a “far-reaching piece of legislation which initiated the greatest vocational school building program in our history (p. 395). It was a time of economic recession in the province (and indeed all of Canada) and unemployment was high. The Act was in direct response to the low employment rate and, as a result, regional vocational schools were established to provide youth with clear occupational objectives, serve those who had already completed high school but who required specific, job-related training prior to entering the workforce, and assist adults who were currently employed but were seeking to learn a specific trade (MacDonald, 1986, p. 30).

Originally these institutions were designated as vocational high schools, but in 1966 they were redefined as Regional Vocational Schools of a post-secondary nature, intended for those who had completed a minimum of grade 11 in an academic high school. Initially, the courses were three years in duration, but soon were changed to two years by reducing time spent on academic course subjects. It should be noted that these schools existed alongside the four regional vocational high schools, four technical institutes and fifteen adult training centres in the province. By the end of the 1960s, over 17,000 Nova Scotians were enrolled in some capacity (part-time or full time) in one of these vocational learning centres (MacDonald, 1986, p.31). By 1970, after a re-organization of the system by the Vocational Education Division of the Department of Education, the system would consist of Regional Vocational Schools, Adult Vocational Training Centres, schools of Applied Arts,

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

and Institutes of Technology and Administration and Financial Management. The federal Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act was passed enabling individuals who were out of school for at least one year to receive training allowances. The aim of this Act, according to MacDonald, “was to improve the supply of skilled manpower and bolster the economy through increased productivity.” (p 32).

As the above shows, the vocational system of education in Nova Scotia, in its early days, developed in a series of fits and starts, in a manner which can be construed as reactionary in many respects, plugging holes and filling needs as the economy, employers, and the war effort required. Although in many respects Nova Scotia was a leader in vocational training, “prior to 1988 Nova Scotia remained the only jurisdiction in Canada which had not instituted, in the formal sense of the term, a community college system (Dennison, 1995, p. 73). Post-secondary vocational needs were being met in an assortment of ways through 13 regional vocational schools that served both adults and high school students, two adult vocational training centres, the Institute of Technology, the Nautical Institute, and a geographical college. Further, some universities, specifically the University College of Cape Breton, also offered vocational training. It was not until 1986 that a Community College Study Committee was appointed to develop a community college model to, as Dennison (1995) explains, “meet the challenges of both the workplace and in education brought about by technological advances and economic restructuring” (p. 73).

In 1988 a White Paper on a Community College System in Nova Scotia was presented, and this became the foundation of what would become the next step in post-secondary, non-university education in the province (Dennison, 1995, p.74). The Nova Scotia Community College was formally established, originally consisting of 18 separate campuses, replacing the regional vocational schools, training centres and institutions of geography and nautical studies. As for management of

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

the new system, “policy determination and general management of the multicampus college became the responsibility of a CEO who was to report directly to the Department of Education” (Dennison, 1995, p. 75). These changes, however, meant that the high school aged learners who previously attended the vocational schools would no longer be accepted and had to enter the regular public secondary school system. Dennison asserts this was intended to make the new Community College more appealing to adult learners for job readiness training and academic upgrading under the sponsorship of the Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia, Community Services or Employment and Immigration Services of Nova Scotia (p.75). Whereas previously vocational education was free of charge for learners, a tuition charge would now be implemented.

According to Dennison (1995), the establishment of NSCC brought forth other changes, as “another initiative undertaken by the community college was the development of customized programs to meet the needs of both private and public-sector organizations” (p. 75). By 1993 there were eighteen NSCC campuses that enrolled over 7000 full time and 8,600 part-time students as programs became increasingly sophisticated to meet growing technological needs and advancing skills essential to the workplace. Distance education became an expanded part of the college’s offerings and connections with business and industry strengthened as NSCC’s programs became increasingly tailored to meet the needs of the labour market (Dennison, 1995, p. 76).

Today, according to the NSCC website (2017) the school consists of 13 campuses spread throughout the province, offering over 120 different programs in five categories which the college labels as Access, Business, IT and Creative Industries, Health and Human Services, and Trades and Technology. Current tuition is approximately \$3100 a year for a full time diploma, \$4,800 for an advanced diploma and \$10,000 for international students. Over 4,500 students graduated from NSCC programs in 2015 and the College reports that there were 10,951 students enrolled in

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

certificate, diploma and advanced diploma programs at NSCC as of September 30, 2015. A further 11,000 learners were enrolled in apprenticeship training, customized training, continuing education and individual credits over the course of that same year. These numbers do not include the further 2000 plus individuals who were anticipated to enrol off-cycle, starting later in the academic year. In short, NSCC reports that it serves approximately 24,000 students at any given time.

From baking to bricklaying, the courses at NSCC are numerous and diverse. Welding, office administration, child and youth study, pharmacy technician, pipe trades and mental health recovery and promotion, the list is long and assorted. The common thread among all subjects taught, however, is to be found in the school's mission statement: "Building Nova Scotia's economy and quality of life through education and innovation" (NSCC website, 2017). In the recently released Academic Plan for the college, NSCC Vice President, Rosalind Penfound, states: "NSCC has – and will continue to have – a critical role in ensuring Nova Scotia has the workforce required for sustainable economic growth and prosperity" (NSCC, 2017, Academic Plan). The initiatives within this plan describe the school's commitment to serving the province's changing labour market needs. The document "was developed through consultation with hundreds of stakeholders to help ensure NSCC's programming is current, relevant and best suited to the economy of tomorrow" (NSCC, 2017, Academic Plan). A question, however, concerns who these stakeholders may be. The following chapter shall begin to examine who indeed these partners are, and what it means for learners that NSCC is accountable to these stakeholders, as well as to the economy itself.

## Chapter Three

*“What they learn here is hardwired to industry.”*

-NSCC, 2017, Strategic Plan

### NSCC – An Overview

As the previous chapter shows, NSCC emerged from a long history of skilled-labour training efforts and initiatives. As described in the earlier chapter, the original goals of these efforts were to enhance the lives of individuals, for want of “something different from existing economic and political forms...something other than an elite-ruled economy and minimal social services...” (Welton, 2013, p. 25). However, it appears that the resulting institution of NSCC has evolved into a place in which the goal is to produce skilled workers compliant to the needs of the economy, as opposed to purposefully fulfilling the desire of personal freedom or individual advancement. NSCC openly places as paramount the needs of the labour market, exposing its instrumental footing. The following will be a synopsis of the mission, vision, structure, and governance of NSCC as per the institution’s own publicly distributed information.

The Nova Scotia Community College strategic plan, *Here and Now* (2017), “is the road map that ensures we stay focused on serving the constantly evolving needs of NSCC students and the provincial economy” (p. 1). The school in no way seeks to diminish its connections to industry, government and the economy. In fact, it prides itself on maximizing and leveraging these relationships. The strategic plan lays out NSCC’s blueprint to expand its course offerings in key national, regional and provincial industry growth sectors, “to align with government priorities, expand program pathways for key sectors through strategic post-secondary and community initiatives [and] use philanthropic investment to expand specialized, industry-focused learning

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

experiences” (NSCC Strategic Plan, 2017, p.15). Under the heading “Academic Quality,” the report explains that NSCC is committed to serving the province’s changing labour market needs and continually reiterates its objective to tightly align to the province’s labour market by “ensuring industry currency through responsive and nimble program development and renewal processes” (p.23).

Under the heading of “Program Quality,” the strategic plan states that NSCC will ensure that their learning experiences are aligned with Nova Scotia’s workforce needs through industry-connected programs and services while developing new programs that support Nova Scotia’s emerging economies and labour market requirements (p.13). It is relevant to note that under both the “Academic Quality” and “Program Quality” headings, NSCC places the greatest emphasis (practically all emphasis) on support of labour market needs as opposed to the needs of individual learners.

The school’s official vision statement – “transforming Nova Scotia one learner at a time,” and mission statement – “building Nova Scotia’s economy and quality of life through education and innovation,” (NSCC, 2017, website) seem to conform perfectly with the realities of NSCC’s outcomes. NSCC claims to be growing Nova Scotia’s economy and producing skilled workers by responding to the needs of the labour market, and there is little to dispute that this is the case. The school works alongside the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency (NSCC’s School of Trades and Technology provides roughly 95% of all apprenticeship technical training for the Province of Nova Scotia) and uses Trades Advisory Committees drawn from industry to inform decision making (NSCC, 2017, website). The school also engages with industry-based Sector Advisory Councils and Applied Research and Learning Partnerships to identify opportunities for programming and changes

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

to curriculum to ensure programs offered are aligned with industry perspectives on current and future labour market needs. NSCC asserts they:

Will continue to gather labour market data to forecast opportunities in areas such as Agriculture, Energy, Environment, Health, Advanced Manufacturing, Geographic Sciences, Analytics and Big Data, Business Intelligence, Cyber Security, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, as well as other vital sectors that will help shape Nova Scotia's future. (NSCC, 2017, Strategic Plan)

The Nova Scotia Community College is an independent institution governed by a Board of Governors, both elected and appointed, which establish the policies that direct the college (NSCC, 2017, Board of Governors). Elected members include two NSCC students, one faculty member, one administrative staff member, and one support staff member. The remaining members are nominated by the Minister of Advanced Education and appointed by The Board, including the President who manages and directs the school's programs, services, and business concerns. The Board's appointed members currently include the Chair, a professional Chartered Accountant, the Vice-Chair, a Fellow of the Institute of Canadian Bankers, and the President, also a Chartered Accountant. The others on The Board have as professional designations: IT Engineer, Project Director for a large construction company, an Executive Director of Nova Scotia Power, a commercial real estate developer, a Senior Director at the Royal Bank, a past president of The Chamber of Commerce, an Executive Director of CIBC World Markets, a construction company president, and a representative from a large, national public relations agency.

Besides the responsibility of making nominations to the Board of NSCC, The Minister for Labour and Advanced Education also approves study programs and annual financial estimates, and tables the College's annual report in the House of Assembly. According to a report released by StudentsNS (2015), The Province and NSCC have a memorandum of understanding that further

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

defines their relationship, including agreed consultation of budgeting and the business plans, program development and review, inclusion and retention of students from underrepresented groups, applied research, accountability, and a graduate survey. The StudentsNS (2015) report states, “there is dramatically more focus on students and student consultation in the universities MOU as compared to the NSCC’s” (p. 9). For example, the actual word “student” is only used two times in the NSCC MOU, whereas it appears 22 times in the university version of the document.

As for NSCC’s financial support, the institution receives the majority of its funding from Provincial operating grants and student fees, although Federal funding also plays a role. In 2011, Provincial government funding accounted for 65.2% of NSCC’s revenues, while tuition contributions amounted to 18.4%. The StudentsNS report observes that “contrary to the trend at the university level, the importance of tuition and fees as a source of funding [at NSCC] has actually diminished over time, falling from 20.4% of operating revenue in 2001” (p. 5). This means the college receives its funding from other sources, such as the significant government funding increase in 2010 with the construction of the Centre for the Built Environment at the NSCC Waterfront Campus which created 5,000 additional spaces for enrollment (StudentsNS, 2015, p. 6). Interestingly, “While NSCC funding varies from year to year based on agreements between the Province and the College (regarding program spaces, new construction, etc.), there is no standard reporting regarding how these decisions are being made or how funds are to be spent” (StudentsNS, 2015, p. 6). Notably, according to a Federal Government press release (2016), it was announced that the Federal Government would be making a \$19.7-million investment in the school to “help create the well-paying middle-class jobs of today and tomorrow.” Of the \$19.7 million in funding for this project, \$7.17 million is from the Government of Canada and \$12.55 million from the Province of Nova Scotia for capital costs. The announcement of the funding claimed it “will jump-start a virtuous circle of innovation, creating the right conditions for long-term growth that will yield benefits for

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

generations to come” (Federal Government of Canada press release, 2016). This funding is part of the larger Atlantic Growth Strategy, which is an initiative targeting actions which stimulate the province’s economy.

There is little doubt NSCC’s connection to the labour market is central to its governance and programming – as can be seen in the choices of courses offered and the corresponding curricula, all of which have a goal to enrich the economy through providing skilled labour. The school is quick to add, remove or alter its courses in response to the emerging needs of the province and its industries through “collaborating with industry leaders and employers to develop and deliver new and innovative programming meeting the needs of the labour market” (NSCC, 2017, Academic Plan). Taking into account the governance, influence, funding and programming of NSCC, one may be left with questions concerning the place of the individual learner in all of this, and, in particular, the ability of students to embark on learning that is an expression of their own agency and individual capabilities. In the following chapters, we will look to Herbert Marcuse to reveal the limitations of NSCC and whether his theory of one-dimensionality offers an explanation as to what harm the college may be generating by participating in such a system.

## Chapter Four

*“We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality.”*

- Herbert Marcuse, 1964

### One-Dimensional Thinking

The following chapter shows evidence that NSCC is an exemplar of Marcus’ one-dimensional thinking and as such contributes to the oppression exerted by the status quo, resulting in a form of domination that inhibits authentic human agency. I will begin with an examination of Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional thinking and proceed in such a way to show that, indeed, NSCC fits the mold of his theory, deploying instrumental reasoning to form its teaching and learning practices.

#### Marcuse’s Theory of One-Dimensional Thinking

For Marcuse (1964), one-dimensional thought is characterised by the “repression of all values, aspirations, and ideas which cannot be defined in terms of the operations and attitudes validated by the prevailing forms of rationality” (p. xii). The result is the loss of genuinely critical thought and a willing submission of the individual to an established system that serves dominant interests. This is the state in which the majority of individuals (in the industrialized world) exist. How is it that we have found ourselves oppressed and dominated by a repressive form of rationality in which we readily participate?

Industrial society emerged during a period when individuals were seeking rights, liberties and freedom from poverty and feudal enslavement. However, Marcuse (1964) claims that any unadulterated geneses of these advancements have since become perverted. In the later stages of industrial society, in which we currently find ourselves, the critical analysis and freedom of thought

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

which created the initial advances have succumbed to productivity, false needs and a self-correcting form of rationality where “independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function” (p. 1). Originally, the combining of industrial advances with free enterprise, together with the technological advances of mechanization, promised individuals a freedom from want – a life in which one could be liberated from the drudgery of working for mere survival and labouring for a master. These advancements had the potential of ushering in an era in which a person may have a life of one’s own and not be shackled to a lifetime of alienated labour. At the dawn of the industrial era, it seemed as if liberation from dominating forces may have been within grasp for many. However, as such a liberating advancement was inimical to the interests of the prevailing socio-economic powers, this anticipated liberation did not happen. Vested interests (industrial and financial capitalists and their governmental and media supporters) determined that such freedom would be counter to their progress and a danger to their very existence. We shall refer to these interests, to use Marcuse’s (1964) term, as those who control the “apparatus” of contemporary industrialized civilization.

Political and economic powers use the apparatus to control society through means that are not overtly recognized. As such, authority “maintains and secures itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization” (Marcuse, 1954, p. 3). To this end, the apparatus creates and promulgates false material and intellectual needs to supplant the necessity to work for mere sustenance. Marcuse calls those needs ‘false’ which are beyond the basic human essentials (food, shelter, etc.). These false needs are created and subsequently used as fodder for socio-economic control by prevailing interests. This is to say that human needs, outside of those required for sustainable existence, are historical; they are socially constructed and unnecessary, in the logical sense of the word. These sham needs, created with the deliberate interest in maintaining social control, are superimposed

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

upon the individual by social, economic and political interests through the apparatus. Marcuse (1964) refers to individuals as having the counterfeit choice of choosing “between brands and gadgets” (p. 7) and in this way, perceived freedom of choice (of sham choices) becomes an instrument of domination.

These artificially-created and imposed needs play a role in the inability to recognize the repression that is taking place. The individual, in no real way, has any control over what they are needing, as these perceived requirements are determined by manipulative external powers. The individual sincerely believes these wants are authentic desires, when in fact, they are aiding in the effort to keep the apparatus in motion. The element of choice is illusionary as we are free to choose what satisfies our needs, but only as far as we are unaware that there is anything beyond the wanting of these desires. This is a form of repressive satisfaction through which we are dominated by the liberty to choose what is given to us to choose from. As Marcuse (1964) states, “the most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence” (p. 4). Essentially, we have a false sense of liberty because we can choose one particular master over another.

Marcuse observes that views that counter prevailing notions are often branded to be irrational (and even neurotic). The repression becomes so deeply entrenched in the psyche of oppressed individuals that critical reason (what Marcuse calls negative thinking) cannot recognize the mechanized control to which it has been subjected by advanced industrial society. It is a deep and progressive state of repression in which individuals are unable to identify that there is anything outside the ideology of the apparatus. One-dimensional thought is the result of sophisticated, intentional management by the status quo to the point at which, per Marcuse (1964), “the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down, (p. 10).

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

It is the loss of the dimension in which reason and critical thought resides, the “ideological counterpart” to the imposing repression of advanced industrial society. To succumb to one-dimensional thinking is to have one’s recognition of truth existing outside of that dimension blunted, to be repressed by a system that, as Marcuse asserts, “contains no facts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole” (p. 11). To live in such a world, unaware of one’s own administrated existence, is to participate in one-dimensional life. This is an existence that sustains willingly its own oppression through voluntary productivity and consumption. We have become, to the apparatus, means to an end as we continue to seek administered means to our manipulated individual ends. This is the full instrumentalization of the individual. As Marcuse (1964) explains, “the highest productivity of labour can be used for the perpetuation of labour, and the most efficient industrialization can serve the restriction and manipulation of need” (p. 18). This is dominance and oppression shrouded in a cloak of liberty and prosperity.

Through normalizing the idea that the continuous struggle to achieve these “needs” is rational (as to think otherwise is seen as absurd), a “happy consciousness” is created under which “people are led to find in the productive apparatus the effective agent of thought and action to which their personal thought and action can and must be surrendered” (Marcuse, 1964 p. 79). In this transfer of autonomy, the apparatus further assumes the role of a moral agent, relieving (or robbing) the individual of normative agency. The ethical implications of what we need and why we need it become the problem of the system, not the individual. Why would we allow ourselves to succumb to such a state? For Marcuse (1964) it is because “its supreme promise is an ever-more comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people who, in a strict sense, cannot imagine a qualitatively different of discourse and action” (p. 26).

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

A problematic consideration is that one-dimensional thinking makes sense. There is no need to desire anything other than the “good life,” especially if one cannot see that any alternative life exists besides the one which the apparatus presents as reality. In this sense, self-determination is illusory, but unknowingly so, as a result of one-dimensional ways of thinking about the world. In the current state of industrialized society, value is reduced to that which is sanctioned by the apparatus. The choices offered by the apparatus opens a path to a satisfying life. Values outside of those offered by the apparatus have been flattened out and attenuated to a point where they have become innocuous or senseless or even insane. Marcuse (1964) sees any challenge, or “negative thinking,” about one-dimensional reason as a “rational confrontation of ‘that which is not’ with ‘that what is’” (p. 66). Negation of one-dimensional reason is the only way out of the tyranny of the machine process of the apparatus. This means the act of contradicting the status quo requires two-dimensional thinking, or a way of seeing reality as truth, not as what is has been presented, historically, by the apparatus.

Difficulties in recognizing the repression that results from one-dimensional reason are profound, as the self-validating tautology of the apparatus is immune to contradiction under a one-dimensional way of thinking. Cognitive-based, abstract (two-dimensional) thought must transcend the illusion of the “facts” that are presented as true by the apparatus to recognize the world as it actually is. To suit its purposes, the apparatus seeks to ensure universals are seen as operational and instrumental, such that the nature of a phenomenon is reduced to its properties and not recognized as having universal significance. Marcuse (1964) calls the methodological translation of the abstract (or the universal) into operational concepts the “repressive reduction” of thought. To give a contemporary example, there is a social media meme which says, “you don’t hate Mondays, you hate Capitalism.” When we are describing the socially accepted things we dread about Mondays, we use generalized terms with no true objective reference. We claim we don’t want to “get out of bed” or

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

“go to the office,” when what these operational concepts actually disguise (or overlook) is the larger concept of the realities of oppressive capitalism. Hidden is the realization that we must submit our time and labour in exchange money. Similarly, Marcuse (1964) gives the example of a worker complaining that pay rates are too low, only to have this claim methodologically translated into, “I don’t have enough money because my wife is in the hospital and I am worried about the doctor’s bill.” The apparatus explains that it isn’t that the pay is too low – the problem is that this man’s wife is in the hospital. “Wages are too low” is a dangerously undiversifiable statement that the status quo cannot leave standing. It must be changed from an abstract claim to one that is idiosyncratic. The reality is that, yes, wages are too low, but this is only recognized through critical, two-dimensional cognition. “Once the personal discontent is isolated from the general unhappiness, once the universals which militate against are dissolved into personal referents, the case becomes a treatable and tractable incident,” an isolated incident of personal hardship, if you will (Marcuse, 1964 p. 111). This systematic elimination of transitory meaning continues the apparatus’ cycle of producing self-validating concepts. It also explains, incidentally, why NSCC is not only an expression of one-dimensional thinking, but why it is impossible even to engage in discourse within the institution regarding its one-dimensionality.

### **NSCC as an Exemplar of One-Dimensional Thought**

Initially, I sought to critique NSCC based on what I perceived to be the lack of critical thinking in its pedagogical practices. This is still the case; however, the reasons the school does not employ critical thinking is much more complex than I originally thought. My preliminary suspicions were that critical thinking skills were not deemed important at NSCC due to issues of expediency and efficiency. However, I have come to realize that, while this may be true on the surface, the absence of critical discourse surrounding NSCC is a result of a much deeper and complex system of

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

subversive influence by the status quo. Further, it would be difficult for NSCC to be other than exactly what it is, which is to say it would be problematic for NSCC to make changes to its practices, given its embeddedness in and support of a system that subscribes to a one-dimensional rationality. Because it is part of the apparatus, NSCC is an entity that is self-perpetuating and self-validating – a closed system so to speak.

NSCC employs means-ends thinking and one-dimensional reasoning to attain its objectives. The school proudly pronounces itself as a vehicle of instrumentality to the extent that it serves economic ends and it is generally lauded for this very reason. We see evidence of this in the school's proclamations of "building Nova Scotia's economy one student at a time" (NSCC, 2017). As for how the school achieves this mission, it is aided and directed by government and industry to produce students to be used as human capital. I can see so untruths in this claim. If we look to the relationship between the needs of industry/employers and the college, as was described in the previous chapter, NSCC is quite clear in its intent to use education and therefore individual learners to serve the marketplace, which in turn directs the mission of the school. They are building the economy *through* their students. This is clear means/ends Instrumentalization of individuals.

The influences of labour market demands mean there is no place for non-economic normative scrutiny within NSCC's pedagogical practices. As such, critical thinking, instead of being thought of broadly as a way to participate in normative discourse, is restricted to technical problem solving by the school's one-dimensionality. One way of showing how NSCC is an exemplar of one-dimensional rationality is by calling on Margaret Archer's discussion of Homo-economicus. According to Archer (2000), Homo economicus (economic man) is driven solely by economic opportunities, and it is these which drive all his or her social actions and behaviours. That is to say, any choice economic man makes any way, anywhere, including in the social realm, must be the

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

rational economic choice. He (or she) is subjective, acts on a case-by-case basis, and is future-focused. In terms of ethics, economic man has no underlying moral code, nor does he or she have an innate sense of morality (“calculus over conscience”, as Marcuse (1967) would say). What is the “right choice” is the instrumental choice, the right choice for the moment, the right decision according to expected positive economic outcomes. The rational choice for Homo economicus is whatever maximizes utility and/or profits. This human always makes economically-driven decisions.

NSCC, like Homo economicus, is by its nature only able to react in an economic and instrumental way to the forces to which it is subjected. This labour-driven learning environment is not reflexive and is, like Homo economicus, incapable of “generating a social self, as powers are not relegated to the agent as an individual, instead it is reliant on structure alone.” (Archer, 2000, p. 255). NSCC is highly structured, yet lacking in agency, unable to do other than the market tells it to do. Preferences, for NSCC, are not dispositional – they are what is the economically driven choice. The school acts with instrumental rationality and the world through which NSCC moves is always open to the shifting political-economic needs of the apparatus. Attachments to all programs, learners or stakeholders are reduced, instrumentalized, or commodified. Further, NSCC has no particular loyalties other than to its own interests, i.e., the economy, and the relationships the school has are ones that are all instrumental in nature.

If the oil fields are in need of workers, NSCC offers the skills to accommodate this labour shortage. If there is a lack of lab technicians in the work force, the school will add more classes to produce these workers. If the market is over saturated with a certain trained skill, the course teaching that skill will no longer be offered. In this way, NSCC is an “individualistic passive agent whose circumstances push and pull [them] around, but who lacks the capacity to combine in order to change them” (Archer, 2000, p. 74). NSCC, just like Homo economicus, has relationships

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

dependent solely on the ups and downs of the marketplace. It is reactive and thus its ability to affect true change is problematic. NSCC, like Archer's interpretation of Homo economicus, employs instrumental rationality to drive the best bargain, moving through a world in which everything is open to negotiated, self-serving exchange. Abstract universals are beyond NSCC and it is pushed and pulled around by circumstances. Homo economicus exercises one-dimensional rationality, as does NSCC.

Returning to Marcuse, it can be assumed that he would see NSCC as part of the apparatus, a component to the continual production of workers needed to produce the false needs that dominant interests used to maintain a repressive social order. It is certainly the case that NSCC is a tool of dominant interests, as it is proudly led and funded by business, industry and pro-industry governments. The school is administered (and administers) in an instrumental way. It is also a fact that larger society sees nothing wrong with this, strengthening my argument that the school is one-dimensional, in that most members of society would consider any other way of looking at the school other than as a productive part of society to be irrational. An assertion that NSCC is a repressive tool of capitalist interests and is antithetical to learner's claims of agency would seem to most to be absurd. To this, I would counter that the school is enforcing a repression – as they become, “an object of administration, geared to produce and reproduce not only the goals but also the values and the promises of the system” (Marcuse, 1972, p. 14). This unrecognized domination is draped in claims of freedom and the perception of choice. This is advanced technological rationality, an example of the “concentration of the national economy of the needs of big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting and sometimes even controlling force” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 21). What better venue for “mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization,” than NSCC, a school which proudly tailors its programs to the needs of the economy (Marcuse, 1964, p. 5)? NSCC is effectively

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

building the economy by producing workers. Aren't we in need of skilled labour in the province?

Are not individuals in need of jobs? NSCC may be an exemplar of one-dimensional reasoning, yet it is efficient and productive. What is at issue? The following chapter will examine why NSCC's adherence to one-dimensional reasoning is a problem in regard to claims of power, autonomy and freedom of the individual.

## Chapter Five

*“Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into  
a powerful instrument of domination.”*

- Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

### What is Damaged in the Act of One-Dimensional Thinking?

The preceding section confirms that NSCC subscribes to a one-dimensional rationale in terms of its governance, mission and practices. It has also been shown that NSCC participates in the process of producing a labour force compliant to the direction of dominant interests. Drawing on the critical ideas of Herbert Marcuse, this chapter will demonstrate why this adherence to one-dimensional reasoning is problematic. The present discussion illustrates how one-dimensional reasoning leads to the inhibiting of student’s abilities to think abstractly, thus constraining opportunities for critical discourse. Ultimately, what is hurt by this instrumentality is the capacity for those both inside and outside NSCC even to critique the presumptions underlying the nature and processes of this institution. In the wake of this failure lies a diminution of the freedom and agency of all those associated with the institution and, more broadly, a threat to truth.

#### **An Evolution of Instrumentalization**

When we look to the origins of vocational learning in Nova Scotia as discussed in Chapter Two, it appears that there has been an evolution of increasingly commodified reasons for extending skills-learning to individuals in, or looking to participate in, the workforce. All learning, in some respect, is instrumental, as “we are embodied beings who must learn to interact with nature in order to reproduce our existence” (Welton, 2013, p. 19). As Habermas (1972) clarifies, our survival also

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

depends on our ability to live together under established norms and rules, as is demonstrated through communicative learning theory. However, there is a third way of learning – that which is emancipatory. This takes knowledge one step further, in such a way that we are able to critique assumptions through critical reflection. It is through this process we are “able to sense that we are not always treated with dignity and respect, that we are exploited and oppressed. And we may understand the way our oppressive reality is veiled” (Welton, 2013, p. 19).

This last way of knowing is how we discover the reasons and social causes of those things which affect our lives. It may be argued that the initial beginnings of Nova Scotia’s vocational learning was an expression of such emancipatory learning, stemming from a desire of individuals, especially those of the working class, to enhance their lives. Perhaps, initially, these beginnings were an example of the spirit of democracy acting to transform the lives of farm workers, fishers, women and those in the rural communities and allowing for expansion of their social lives; to “unlock life to all the people” (Coady, 1971 p. 59). However, the teaching of skills, once taught as a way to enhance and emancipate, appears to have been turned on its head. It may be the case that the early years of vocational learning in Nova Scotia spelled an awakening, as a “strong current of participative democracy flowed through our history,” (Welton, 2013, p. 26), but eventually this was co-opted by a new era.

During the early 1970s to the early 1980s, the globe experienced a time of economic stagflation and new blood surged through the heart of the self-regulated market. The economy was in a period of recession, with high levels of inflation and unemployment. Kluegel (1987) suggests that suspicion of the causes of poverty and negative attitudes toward welfare spending were one of the fallouts of these macro-economic challenges. Politicians who opposed anti-poverty initiatives were elected. The results were cuts to anti-poverty programs, changing beliefs about the poor and

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

more conservative attitudes toward welfare spending. Kluegel (1987) continues by noting that welfare programs were seen as wasteful, and the working poor felt less sympathy for those who were unemployed. In general, anti-poor sentiment increased during this period. It was a widely-held belief that, given enough time and with enough cuts, the market would regulate and distribute goods fairly – it will all “trickle-down,” to use a phrase coined by Will Rogers. This trend toward austerity and labour market prominence coincided with the rise of NSCC.

### **Critical Thought in Jeopardy**

Between government policies of austerity and the need for human capital, critical thought seemed to drop off the radar. Vocational learning, what once could be considered a vehicle for emancipation, became a tool solely to produce labourers to suit market needs. By its mandate, students at NSCC are there to learn “practical” skills, ones that will allow the school, through its students, to build a better economy– and in fulfilling its mission, the school contributes to a suppression of critical thought.

At this juncture, we must ask what, exactly, is meant by critical thought? Graeber (2001) explains that there are two orders of critical thinking. The first entails the recognition that our normal, “every day” way of viewing the world is often incomplete or wrong, and we can then seek to figure out how things actually are. An example of this would be Plato’s “bent stick” analogy, which explains that we see a stick as bent when it is placed in water, but we know it is not. We then proceed to seek answers, to determine why the appearance doesn’t match reality. This is essentially using criticality for operational problem solving. However, the second, more powerful order of critical theory, “not only explains how things actually work, but does so in a way as to account for why people did not perceive it that way to begin with” (Graeber, 2001, p. 60). This is the type of critical thinking addressed in this thesis.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Criticality, as defined by the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory (of which Marcuse was a part), is “the ability of individuals to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more conscious control over their everyday lives” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 13). It is the ability to think abstractly about one’s situation or about the topic in which one is currently engaged to recognize higher-level truths, eventually re-engaging with one’s environment armed with this new knowledge. The Frankfurt School refers to this as “ideology critique,” which, in practice, exposes how bureaucratic capitalism imposes beliefs systems upon us and uses these to maintain inequalities and injustices – ones which we are falsely led to believe are in our best interests (Brookfield, 2005 p. 13). For Marcuse, critical thought is the delivering of oneself from a one-dimensional way of looking at the world, as the ability to abstract to a two-dimensional way of thinking leads to authentic truths. As I have already asserted that NSCC is an environment based on and characterized by one-dimensional thought, or in other words, a lack of critical thinking, what does this mean for the learners at the school?

### **Impacts of One-Dimensional Thought on NSCC Students**

Employing this higher-order critical thinking at NSCC would entail turning its very reason for existence upside down. Currently, as has been shown, NSCC is in the business of creating human capital. The system would not be repressive, however, if it employed and encouraged critical thought. Yet this would create a problem, as NSCC would no longer be able to produce what Nussbaum (2010) refers to as “useful machines” (p.2). This is the cycle in which this thesis has been arguing contemporary people have been caught. In the end, NSCC is one-dimensional, and by not providing its students (or itself) the opportunity to think critically, or to learn to think critically, the school is depriving its students (and itself) of the ability to think in ways that “transcend local loyalties, to analyze information from a perspective of a citizen of the world and the ability to

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

imagine oneself in the experience or past of another” (Nussbaum, 2010 p. 10). The ability to think abstractly, to remove oneself from immediate realities, to compare and contrast with alternative ways of being and thinking, is lost by foregoing criticality. Here is why this is a problem.

Skilled trades taught at NSCC include the traditional plumbing, electrical, welding, etc., as well as those that involve the biotech industry, pharmaceuticals and the techniques that allow for automation, big data collection, manipulation of the environment, the energy sector and even artificial intelligence. These are the information technology classes, the medical laboratory assistant classes, the diplomas in pipe trades needed to work in the oil fields, software and information management, industrial and marine, environmental engineering, and the list goes on. As per the school’s one-dimensional character, courses required for these diplomas and certificates entail no official learning outcomes dedicated to a critical analysis of the larger questions or concerns regarding the subjects and environments (both social and ethical) encountered once these skills are applied and/or the learner lands in the workplace. This suggests that the student’s ability to cope and make good decisions (social and ethical) once they are employed in their respective field may be stunted by the lack of opportunity for learning to engage in critical discourse at NSCC.

On a deeper level, not only are the results of the lack of critical learning processes responsible for student’s inability to view information from a world-view perspective and cause possible problems in their future workplace, it is a threat to their agency. As stated previously, the official mission statement of NSCC is, “building Nova Scotia’s economy and quality of life through education and innovation,” and the vision statement is, “transforming Nova Scotia one learner at a time” (NSCC 2017). Here, I take particular note of the word “transformation” and immediately think of Mezirow’s (1981) use of Habermas (1972) in his distinguishing of “transformative learning,” in which learning occurs in two domains: instrumental learning (empirically-based, task-oriented

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

problem solving or “learning to do”) and communicative learning, which entails the understanding of what others communicate in terms of “values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 8).

Transformative learning takes place when we are able to reflect on and judge presuppositions.

However, in the case of NSCC, the term has been used (coopted?) not to pertain to an individual’s power to transform oneself and subsequently society, but instead to transform the market into one that is economically prosperous. The transformation to which Mezirow refers is related to learning that entails critical analysis of cultural assumptions, expectations of how we think and act as an expression of agency. This is not the case at NSCC.

### **Threats to Agency**

NSCC’s objective may be to build Nova Scotia’s economy through education and innovation, yet at what cost to the individual? The act of questioning assumptions through critical analysis is essential to agency. Properties of agency, according to Bandura (2006), include intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness (or self-regulation) and self-reflection. Given these parameters, agency is exhibited when one contributes in the shaping and outcomes of their life, expressing capacities through critical reflection. The path to agency, therefore, is not inherent to the existing vocational model. How can an institution with this inherently non-reflexive, instrumental motivation produce agents capable of exercising autonomy?

Essential to agency is choice. Yet, according to a report from StudentsNS (2015), at NSCC “the number of available seats per program is supposed to be determined by labour market demand and resources, not student demand” (p.9). The “choices” the students make (including what courses in which they can enroll) are pre-determined by the economy, therefore the school. The curriculum for each course is designed based on this same motivation, thus there is a lack of meaningful choice

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

open to the students. In what way is there room for agency in this scenario? Learners at NSCC experience a lack of choice because 1) the courses are selected by the economy, and 2) the curriculum is not open to true analysis or critique.

According to Freire (1973), one needs to not only adapt to reality to realize peak agency but one also needs to be making critical choices in order to transform that reality. The extent to which one can act on (or make choices in) their environment, “will largely determine their humanization or dehumanization, their affirmation as subjects or their reduction as objects” (Freire, 1973, p. 5). However, at NSCC, not only is choice limited, but the ability to reflect critically upon the information relayed in the courses is suppressed. Here I wonder if there is discussion in the NSCC classrooms regarding labour movements, gender relations in the traditionally male-dominated fields, or the historical, ethical, and environmental issues connected to the contents of what they are learning. What would happen if students began to critically question the normative character and historical impacts of the trades they are learning? There is no room in NSCC’s agenda for this type of critical analysis. This, I assert, is a threat to agency. Here’s why.

For Freire (1973), critical reflection not only educates the individual, but is essential for authentic humanization, the optimal political environment, and guards against the “massification” of society. In very basic terms, massification is a state of suppression of reflection and of reliance on experts to make choices in society. Freire (1973) asserts,

In our highly technical world, mass production as an organization of human labour is possibly one of the most potent instruments of man’s massification. By separating his activity from the total project, requiring no critical attitude toward production, it dehumanizes him. (p. 34)

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

In other words, when one is not in dialogue or participating freely in terms of critical thought, one is not truly or fully experiencing agency. If we think of NSCC learners as “pre-labourers” it can be argued that they are alienated objects subjected to a state of massification. This aligns with Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional thinking, in that individuals are confronted with the problem of being unable to reach the level of critical thought needed to obtain a state of freedom, as they are encumbered by the unrecognized power of the apparatus. As long as learners are “kept incapable of being autonomous, indoctrinated and manipulated down to their very instincts,” (Marcuse, 1964, p.6) the freedom they believe they are expressing through choosing a course at NSCC is illusionary.

### **In summary**

NSCC is an exemplar of Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional thought. The school’s mission, governance and practices are instrumentally-driven, leaving no room for critical thinking practices. As a result, individual freedom and agency are threatened. A characteristic of a controlled, instrumentalized society, according to Marcuse (1964) is, “the fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose” (p. 19). There certainly appears to be a well-established harmony between NSCC and the “national purpose” if we are to take that as representing a labour-driven government and market.

Once discourse is deprived of its criticality, truth is no longer sought but imposed by the status quo. This seems no more clear than in the case of NSCC, where the “elements of autonomy, discovery, demonstration and critique recede before designation, assertion and imitation” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 85). The language of NSCC bares this out, as it is a system under which thought is kept in line with selected facts, with no room left for critique of those facts. In turn, agency is at its most threatened when the individual (unknowingly) gives their freedoms of personal thought and action up to the apparatus “to the extent that the system then assumes the role of a moral agent, absolving

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

the individual of normative responsibility” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 79). In short, NSCC, touted as a liberating force, is actually responsible for the instrumentalization of its students and perpetuates a cycle of using human capital in a way that impedes autonomy.

As long as education is used as a tool by a non-reflexive, one-dimensional system to produce instrumentalized, one-dimensional learners, agency is unachievable. Education like this inhibits the ability for people to think critically, learn emancipatively, express autonomy, and to make changes to alleviate political, social and economic barriers. The application of reasoning to the abstract (through a two-dimensional way of looking at the world) becomes impossible, implying that there is no room for universal concepts such as equality, justice and freedom.

NSCC positions itself, and is largely seen, as facilitating and promoting the freedom of individuals through education and economy. Yet it is systematically eliminating the opportunity for critical discourse. When we no longer employ abstract reasoning to consider larger realities, thinking becomes a tool to attain certain ends, which leads to problems concerning agency. I have come to this conclusion through asserting the theory of one-dimensional thinking. However, there may be issues concerning Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensionality. If so, it may be the case that my argument does not hold up. The following chapter will examine whether my assertion that NSCC impedes agency is weakened by criticisms of Marcuse’s philosophy.

## Chapter 6

*“Not every problem someone has with his girlfriend is necessarily due to the capitalist mode of production.”*

- Herbert Marcuse, *The Listener* (Magazine), 1978

### Critiques of Marcuse’s Theory of One-Dimensionality

As my argument rests solidly upon Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensionality, it is just good scholarship to examine whether any critiques of this theory diminish my claim. Can the assertion that NSCC is one-dimensional, therefore instrumental and a threat to one’s agency, stand up to criticisms of the theory upon which my argument is based? Here I will examine six criticisms of Marcuse and in turn offer counter-critiques for each one.

Some critics of Marcuse assert that his argument against the repression of individual freedom is in itself a form of authoritarianism and, further, that he is advocating for violence. This group includes Alisdair MacIntyre, who would go so far as claiming Marcuse as a proponent of Stalinism. (Thompson, 2015, p. 5). This accusation rests on the argument that Marcuse was acting as “intellectual spokesman” for a revolution-minded minority who sought to re-educate people according to their own truth, while suppressing competing opinions (Thompson, 2015, p. 5). Similarly, Marcuse has also been accused of being in favour of terrorist violence. Although accepting that in principal Marcuse did not condone terrorism, Alex Callinicos (1985) says that Marcuse “cannot be wholly exculpated from the disastrous consequences of the actions of the Red Brigades, Red Army Faction, and other such organizations” (p. 65).

Concerning the claims that Marcuse advocates for totalitarianism, the opposite is true. Marcuse argues for an enhanced democracy, not totalitarianism. As he states, “the question, who is

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

qualified to make all these distinctions, definitions, identifications for the society as a whole, has now one logical answer, namely, everyone” (Marcuse, 1965 p. 106). For Marcuse, “access to objective truth justifies the means of censoring dominant, mainstream ideas and discriminating in favour of outlawed knowledges” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 216). The suppression of ideas harmful to liberty in order to increase freedom is not totalitarian. Rather than being totalitarian, the argument is more the enforcement of the allowance of those views that are now suppressed. Regardless, the critique that Marcuse may be advancing a state of totalitarianism (which it has been shown he is not) has no effect on the validity of his argument concerning one-dimensionality.

As for the charge that Marcuse’s theory is an incitement to violence, again the simple answer is that even if this is the case, it does not make the theory wrong. One truth does not entail the other. Denise Thompson (2015) in her defence of Marcuse against these criticisms, adds that “authors are not responsible for the uses to which their work is put by others” (p. 5). Regardless of the responsibility authors may or may not have for the reactions of their readers, Marcuse makes the distinction between the structural violence embedded in the current system and the violence that would eliminate this systemic violence. Marcuse asserts there is “a difference between revolutionary and reactionary violence, between violence practiced by the oppressed and by the oppressors. In terms of ethics, both forms of violence are inhuman and evil” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 103). In other words, Marcuse claims that, eventually, people would have to choose a side, between truth and falsity, right and wrong, oppression and freedom – and perhaps necessary (and evil) action may have to be taken to achieve liberty from repressive forces. It may be an historically necessary event, but not necessarily so.

A second attempt at a condemnation of Marcuse’s theory accuses him of being dogmatic in his argument. These critics would claim that in actuality there is no guarantee of truth, no ultimate

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

reality or final answer to be arrived at, and that “to assert something is true is to defend it against counter-arguments and disconfirming evidence, and that this is a form of dogmatism, even fundamentalism” (Thompson, 2015, p. 6). Positivists, relativists and empiricists would take issue with Marcuse’s claim of an objective truth and its discoverability, especially as one-dimensionality assumes there is truth to be discovered outside of our experience.

A discussion surrounding the debate between rationalism and empiricism, positivism and relativism, exceeds the bounds of this paper. It is the case that Marcuse asserts that there is a truth to be discovered of which most are currently unaware; however, this is in itself not dogmatic. Marcuse knew there was falsity and repression (even through empiricist, positivist methods of deduction one can determine inequalities in society) and sought to correct these insufficiencies and injustices. He is not asserting a Platonic, absolute truth as much as he is seeking an alternative to what he knows to be false, deficient and oppressive. Marcuse, as opposed to claiming an objective truth, “was saying that the truth, in the sense of (certain) facts about the social world, was a lie in the sense that it was anti-social and dehumanising” (Thompson, 2015, p. 7). In short, Marcuse is arguing for what ought to be, in a normative sense, as opposed to making absolute truth claims. Instead of being dogmatic, Marcuse argues against an ideology of social control and towards an unimpeded freedom and rationality – whatever that may look like.

Thirdly, some may accuse Marcuse of being too vague concerning who the culprit is in the domination, casting suspicion on the theory. Phrases such as “the apparatus”, “the administered society,” “the status quo”, “dominant power structures” and the like do not point a finger at any particular entity. Who, or what group in particular, is responsible for the oppression? Critics who accuse Marcuse of being murky in his definitions think he is asserting there is a society that must be overthrown, and if so, he must be recommending an upheaval of an already existing state. Within

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

this state we must have particular individuals to whom we serve, even if we do so willingly. These would be capitalist leaders, politicians, etc. So why doesn't Marcuse name them?

Marcuse understood that the repression experienced was so systemic, total and subversive that it was not identifiable in conventional terms. The argument against Marcuse's apparent inability to name the oppressors actually shows the critic's inability to see the extent of the domination under which they are repressed. It is not so simple as to point a finger at that certain industrialist or politician who is keeping society from true liberation. It is all those things and all of whom are not conducive to freedom. It is those "policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which ... are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery" (Marcuse, 1965, p.82). There is equal opportunity to participate in the repression. Here, Thompson (2015) suggests that in the use of such non-specific concepts Marcuse was strengthening his argument that there are structures of domination present even when naming claims otherwise, which is to say we call our current system 'democracy' yet class-structures and the like do not reflect the truth of what a democracy entails. Just as Sandra Bartky (1990) describes the force of disciplinary power over the female body, the oppression of which Marcuse speaks is, "everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky, 1990 p. 74). The repression is non-centralized and ever changing to suit the needs of those who enforce it. Who are they? "They are everyone and no one in particular..."

Fourthly, there are those who claim Marcuse's philosophy is arrogant and overtheorized. Whitfield (2014) even asserts that there is "something rather unsavory about Marcuse telling his readers (and their fellow citizens) that they are trapped in the coils of ersatz satisfactions and values, a condition that the author is smart enough to realize" (Dissent Magazine). The argument here is that Marcuse was condescending in his beliefs – that he "assigned himself the task of telling his

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

readers how little autonomy they really enjoyed, that their economic security was in fact a form of servitude to irrational and impersonal forces designed to maximize productivity at the expense of pleasure” (Whitfield, 2014, Refusing Marcuse). In hand with this accusation of self-importance, Whitfield alleges that Marcuse, in his references to Hegel, Marx, Freud, Heidegger and the like, and in not mentioning any actual culprits responsible for the oppression, is guilty of over-theorizing. Further, Marcuse is accused of writing in a style of acquired language that is difficult, dense and opaque. A bureaucratic prose that presumes that a “ponderous style is synonymous with wisdom” (Whitfield, 2014, Refusing Marcuse).

The above are weak criticisms. Firstly, arrogance and pomposity do not entail untruth. Neither does writing style. Whitfield is using ad hominem reasoning to claim Marcuse’s argument is wrong because he is demonstrating intellectual or academic superiority in a way the critic finds pretentious. It’s a fallacy of the first order. Secondly, it appears that Whitfield takes issue with Marcuse’s level of academic expertise. This form of “anti-intellectualism” is pervasive and dangerous, the level to which is too deep to address in this thesis. As for Marcuse referring to Heidegger, Hegel, Freud, etc., and not naming individuals, that has already been discussed in my counter to critique number three. To add to this, however, Marcuse is a philosopher who participates in critical theory, and his form of analysis does not require the use of such denotations.

As shown, the attack on Marcuse’s ‘over theorizing’ does nothing to discredit his argument for, as a critical theorist, it is essential that Marcuse base his argument on the rational. That said, Marcuse was also heavily influenced by actual events. “It was Marcuse’s political engagement and his relationship with student activists that influenced much of his theorizing...for example; it was Angela Davis who made Marcuse aware of the urgency of the black struggle for liberation” (Farr, 2014, Refusing Whitfield and Rethinking Marcuse).

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Marcuse has also been critiqued using what I will call “the argument from the future.” Under these criticisms Whitfield claims if Marcuse did once have a place in political/social philosophy “the intellectual and moral legacy of Herbert Marcuse won’t be due for a revival anytime soon” and that his writings “are not central to academic discourse and tend to be reviewed only in specialized journals” (Whitfield, 2014, *Refusing Marcuse*). The reason? Because Marcuse failed to foretell the future. This critique argues that Marcuse failed to anticipate the political, economic and social fallout of the sixties – in short, the Reagan era and the general rise of the Right in Europe – thus destroying the philosopher’s argument.

Is Marcuse’s inability to predict the future a valid critique? It appears to be another *ad hominem* or perhaps a strawman argument. The fact that the Right has gained in popularity does not prove the invalidity of the theory of one-dimensional thinking. Nor does Marcuse’s inability to prophesize the rise of Ronald Reagan. It is not the case that Marcuse underestimated capitalism’s resilience, nor was he unaware of the reactive power of the right. “To some degree, the theme of *One-Dimensional Man* is that capitalism has a way of adapting to emancipatory movements...Marcuse was always aware of the development of reactionary forces in tandem with liberatory forces” (Farr, 2014, *Refusing Whitfield and Rethinking Marcuse*). As a critical and dialectical thinker, the inability of Marcuse to account for or to predict the actual occurrences of the future in his work is irrelevant. As for falling out of fashion, “it should not surprise anyone that a book about one-dimensional man is not that popular in a one-dimensional society” (Farr, 2014, *Refusing Whitfield*). As a side note to Whitfield’s assertion that Marcuse is no longer relevant to academic circles, the International Herbert Marcuse Society is alive and well, has hundreds of members throughout the world, and is planning their seventh biennial conference at York University in October of 2017, per the IHMS website.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

The sixth and final critique I will offer is one concerning the importance Marcuse gives in his theory to the isolation of the individual, which may pose concerns for those who place value on collaboration. Adult educators generally subscribe to the concept that best practices include collaborative learning processes and in embracing a diversity of perspectives and experiences (Brookfield, 2005, p. 217). For many adult educators, learning is an inherently social act, “in which we depend on others to be critical mirrors reflecting back to us aspects of our assumptive clusters we are unable to see” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 198). Learning communities, communities of practice, and scholarly communities are looked upon as productive experiences for learners. Group projects, diverse learning teams and co-creation of work are encouraged and often required of adult learners. Yet Marcuse claims that in order to learn in the best possible way, in order to reach truth and discovery, one must be in isolation. This is certainly at odds with mainstream education theory.

Marcuse offers a counterpoint to these traditional adult education ideas concerning diversity and collaboration as he “contributes a new dimension to a critical theory of adult learning – inwardness, isolation, distance, privacy, and subjectivity – that usually receive little attention (Brookfield, 2005, p. 195). For Marcuse, to participate in social experiences, including learning experiences, is to endure dominated living in an administered world. The pressure to conform to the social environment means that individual thought is sacrificed. This is in direct challenge to traditional educative practices, but it doesn’t mean that the argument is wrong, as it may be that “isolation and separation – the conditions of true autonomy– are potentially revolutionary precursors to a commitment to social change” (Brookfield, 2003, p. 195). It is the case that autonomous learning is also seen by adult educators as a positive condition to adult learning (here we think specifically about self-directed learning) yet the potential subversive meaning of such autonomy has not been fully examined (Brookfield, 2003, p.195). It would seem that in education collaboration is valued, yet so is autonomy. There seems to be a dichotomy in this. However, for

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Marcuse, autonomous thought, brought about through separation from the social world, is the path to true learning. To bring about enlightening change one must separate themselves “from the contaminating influences of conformity and consumerism [and the] day-to-day reality of the surrounding culture” (Brookfield, 2003, p. 196). When groups are working together it is more likely that the apparatus and one-dimensional thinking is in effect, as dominant ideas are reinforced rather than challenged. To summarize, this focus on inwardness and isolation is in opposition to accepted beliefs about collaborative learning, but this estrangement does not in itself make Marcuse’s theory wrong.

I have offered six possible critiques of Marcuse and his argument concerning one-dimensional thinking. Certainly, there are others. However, none of the ones addressed threaten the validity of the argument. Marcuse does not advocate violence, nor is he arguing for a form of totalitarianism. It has been shown that he is not dogmatic or guilty of being intentionally vague. The argument that he is arrogant is a non-starter, as is the critique that he “over theorizes”. The assertion that he did not predict the future rise of the Right is not exactly true, nor is it relevant to his theory. Lastly, the claim that the argument of one-dimensionality includes the separation of the individual from the social does not refute the theory’s validity – it may not be a popular concept in the halls of adult learning, but the argument still stands.

It may, in fact, be the case that many of the above-mentioned critiques are themselves a result of the dominance of the hidden agenda. In a sense, the critiques, if looked upon as generating from a one-dimensional perspective, aid in the strengthening of Marcuse’s argument. Denial of the dominating system is essential to the administered society, as to acknowledge it would be to be participating in two-dimensional thought. Now that I have offered critiques and counter-arguments

**ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC**

to the theory of one-dimensional thinking, I can assume the argument is sound enough to proceed with finding a way out of the dilemma faced by NSCC.

## Chapter Seven

Notissimum quodque male, maxime tolerabile

*“The most familiar evils are the most tolerable.”*

-Titus Livius (around 59 BC – 17 AD)

### Conclusion and a Way Forward

This thesis began with the history of vocational learning in Nova Scotia and how it led to the creation of NSCC. The next chapter examined the policies, governance and practices of the school. Next we moved to a description of Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional thinking and on to the assertion that NSCC is built upon and exhibits all the characteristics of this theory. Finally, we challenged Marcuse’s argument, only to find that it remained intact in the face of several critiques. In short, I have shown that NSCC is an exemplar of Marcuse’s one-dimensionality, therefore it is instrumental in its intentions and a threat to learner’s autonomy. But to what end?

In my introduction, I recounted the suspicions and concerns I had while teaching in a vocational environment. This included an unease regarding the student’s abilities to fully understand anything presented to them without first establishing a foundation of criticality. To recap, I felt the learners needed to know they could question and analyse information in comparison to a larger concept – the truth, whatever that may be. There was a need to realize that the truth was not necessarily that which was being taught, but a concept to be held apart from the subjects learned, upon which the information can be weighed. Although originally I assumed it was the learner’s education that is compromised due to the lack of criticality, I have come to understand that so too is their freedom and agency. By putting NSCC’s practices through the ‘black box’ of Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensionality, I am able to understand more completely the reasons for, and the implications of, this lack of criticality in vocational learning at NSCC.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

The claim can be made that individuals at NSCC are bettering themselves, becoming more employable, and therefore more productive members of society. However, by bringing the instrumental nature of NSCC to light, it is the case that “the main value judgement to be made is whether we wish our personal powers, capacities, capabilities, skills and talents—aspects of our ‘selves’—to be shaped, channelled and developed in order that we become capital to the greatest possible extent,” (Rikowski, 2001, p.36).

For NSCC, instrumentality is the saving grace of society. But this is untenable. Means-end thinking constrains the full range of decision making and does not take into account an individual’s relation to the world. Further, it has been shown that NSCC is non-reflexive, therefore unable to meaningfully affect social change – by its own definition and policies, it can only react to the labour market and live in a one-dimensional world. The impact of reducing people to one-dimension means individuals are unable to question, or even recognize, the social, political, cultural, and psychological mechanisms that repress them. The critical thinking skills needed to identify weak arguments, expose hidden assumptions and bias, to recognize subtle inferences and the like are not on NSCC’s agenda. Perhaps NSCC offers many courses from which to choose and an array of future occupations from which to pick, however Marcuse was very aware of how a little bit of autonomy could go a long way toward prohibiting a greater autonomy. The question remains, how autonomous can people who are administered be?

NSCC is a system which lacks the recognition of alternatives beyond the established order in which it exists, closed to possibilities of an escape from its own biases toward conformity and repression. Even the language used within the school’s policy and in its own descriptions do not hold up to rational (two-dimensional) abstraction. Here I claim that even the word “learning” is co-opted to mean something other than its true denotation. Further, the word “economy” is used in a

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

way which stands for “society”, or the community in which we live. In this manner, “growing Nova Scotia’s economy one student at a time,” sounds like a positive, progressive act. In truth, however, one can replace this mission statement with “Teaching humans how to be capital so they can serve the very economic forces that repress them,” and maintain the integrity of the original. Yet it does not have quite the same ring to it. NSCC’s use of language reveals the power of the real, or the actual, to reduce the rational – a sure sign of instrumental, or one-dimensional, reasoning. Once language has been manipulated as, “it becomes impossible to negate the system – to say that the system is wrong or irrational...this is because everyday language is rejigged towards always referring to functions within the system” (Robinson, 2010, *One Dimensional Man?*). We are thus dealing with a tautology in which the structure (or the school in this case) is self justifying, or to reiterate, a closed system.

Students at NSCC are stealthily prevented from thinking critically and are forced into making only those choices which fit into the agenda of an administered status quo. Looking through a lens of Marcuse’s one-dimensionality, we are able to realize there is another dimension outside of this system. Yet, as we become increasingly commodified as a society, we are trapped in the cycle of production and wants. But there is a way out of this domination. The answer is “not quantitative accumulation, but a qualitative “leap” necessary to transform this apparatus of destruction into an apparatus of life” (Robinson, 2010, *One Dimensional Man?*). The “leap” here is participation in the dialectical, to see things as other than as they are, or, arguably, to see thing as they truly are. One critique of Marcuse that I have not yet addressed is the claims that the thinking behind *One-Dimensional Man* is pessimistic in terms of overcoming the domination of an instrumental apparatus. Marcuse’s writings serve to enlighten and inform but offer little by way of prescription. From a logical point of view this is not a threat to the theory’s validity. From a psychological point of view, however, it is quite distressing.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

The theory of one-dimensionality is as relevant today as ever. Marcuse asserts that existing forms of oppression in our society negate critical consciousness as well as freedom. It also explains why economic inequalities are accepted and even perpetuated by the victims of these inequalities and, as I have shown, it explains why NSCC exists and practices in the manner it does. “To grow Nova Scotia’s economy”, yes, but to do so by producing a compliant workforce devoid of those critical thinking skills which may lead to questioning of the school’s intent. Is the president and CEO of NSCC explicitly aware of this? Probably not, as he too is caught in the apparatus. Who is ultimately responsible? Everyone and no one... the status quo. Is there a way out, a method by which we can restore the autonomy of these learners?

In practical terms a revolution against the apparatus is probably not in our near future. Nor can we each disappear, isolating ourselves in contemplation. We live in a commodified world, where “people develop their identity and calculate their sense of self-worth in purely economic terms” (Brookfield, 2005 pg. 70). This is not about to change any time soon. The question then becomes what, if anything, can be done to restore the autonomy the students of NSCC are deprived of? To ‘soften’ the effects of an administered life, so to speak? “Negative thinking” (critical thinking) negates the negatives of this oppression, therefore has a positive affect on the freedom of the individual. We have the capacity to claim this liberation once the one-dimensionality is recognized. To do this we must remove ourselves from the subversive influences pervasive in the existing apparatus, adopting a form of awareness that is truly emancipating. I suggest that if NSCC were somehow able to incorporate the teaching of the humanities, or a humanities-style way of teaching, into selections of its curricula, it may ease the situation somewhat.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

### **Why the Humanities?**

Since enrolling in a MA of Education, I have taught for Halifax Humanities 101, a program that offers free, university-level, non-credit educational programs in the liberal arts for adults living on low incomes. Halifax Humanities believes that the study of traditional humanities disciplines can provide learners who are under-waged or, for various other reasons, are unable to pursue a post-secondary education with important tools for enriching their lives. This year-long course is modeled on the Clemente Course in the Humanities, a program founded by educator, Earl Shorris. The philosophy behind the program is based on Shorris' (2000) claim that a perpetual cycle of “surround of force” prohibits people from participating in the full aspects of society and bars them from making those emancipatory changes needed to alleviate the forces that work against them. If we compare Shorris' “surround of force” with Marcuse's “administered society” we can draw similarities. Both succeed in keeping people from autonomous choice and, ultimately, freedom. For Shorris, the way “out” of the repressive system is through a humanities education that encourages self-reflection and critical thought, enabling autonomy, political participation and a full public life, combating the status quo which prohibits agency. This is achieved thorough the study of literature, logic, art, philosophy, poetry, and the like. These studies usually live only in the university environment where many students, even those in other disciplines, may find their way into these classes. In the NSCC environment there is not even the chance of becoming an accidental tourist in a humanities class.

Many theories point to the humanities as the way to empower individuals to be fuller, more emancipated citizens, as a conduit to battling the perpetual cycle of “surround of force” that keeps people from making those changes required to alleviate the forces that work against them. How? By allowing individuals to challenge mainstream perspectives, to discover a place from which they can

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

question fundamentally held beliefs and to flex their latent or previously un-nurtured critical thought muscles. To examine their lives in relation to ancient and modern concepts of freedom, justice, logic and history, and to freely express their autonomy and direct their lives. Martha Nussbaum (2010) suggests that self-examination, as taught through the humanities, is key to guarding against influence and ensuring mutual respect – by being able to see the “other side” of arguments and thus humanizing the political “other.” She claims it is a false binary to assume that one must choose between education that leads to employability and education that makes good citizens – according to Nussbaum, they can be one in the same. Yet as this binary endures, we continue to assume that humanities teachings and education for employment are opposing pedagogies. There is also a fallacy concerning who is capable and deserving of learning the liberal arts as well as for what purpose, a discussion about which is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **A Need for Intolerance?**

Brookfield, (2005) claims that in order for students to develop autonomous thought, Marcuse calls for an intolerance of certain teaching practices. I would assume that practices such as those exhibited by NSCC would be among those not to be tolerated. In his essay, *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), Marcuse says,

The restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new and ridged restrictions on teaching and practices in the educational institutions, which, by their very method and concepts, serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behaviour – thereby precluding apriori a rational evaluation of the alternatives. (p.100)

NSCC exists to create labourers to keep the economy afloat. It is not moved by developing a set of intellectual arts or honing an individual’s ability to critically reflect. According to Cote and

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Allahar (2011), “Education, as embodied in the liberal arts and sciences, involves a critical analysis of arguments and the ability to communicate ideas. In contrast, training involves a memorization of facts and procedures” (p. 103). Akin to Tom Nesbit’s (2013) description of the early Canadian approaches to adult education, I argue that the humanities may be a path toward providing the vocational learner a clear view and perhaps a way out of “corporate greed, lack of equal economic opportunities; social inequality...and alienation from the prevailing political system that seems incapable of doing much to redress the public discontent” (p.5). Were the school somehow convinced to even gently incorporate some elements of critical thought in to its curricula, perhaps through teaching some aspects of what is traditionally considered to be part of the humanities realm, it would be an act of subversion. As such, I don’t soon expect to see NSCC adopting policies that make apparent its underlying oppressiveness, to ‘lift the veil’ and expose its instrumentalist bones. Unfortunately, we seem stuck, as NSCC is inherently instrumental and would not seek to incorporate elements to its curriculum that would only serve to enhance the criticality of the learner. Its entire existence is based on serving the economy, not the individual.

As initiatives concerning austerity and economy-building proliferate, learning in a way that promotes critical thought appears to dissipate. Marcuse tells us why this is so. NSCC’s programs are false paths to personal freedom and agency. When education is intended for production of human capital, the result is an increased oppression within an already repressive system. Critical thinking, as taught through the humanities, could be the key to defending oneself against these influences. However, acquiring critical learning tools such as these are antithetical and a threat to NSCC’s very existence. The school, under the guise of practicality and desire for economic growth, logically, could not teach, well, logic. In this way it seems that indeed, as asserted by Freire, education is a political act—whether in serving the status quo or in learning those tools which can guard against it.

## ONE-DIMENSIONAL REASONING AND NSCC

Proponents of NSCC and similar institutions will see these claims as threatening and misguided. Or, as per Marcuse's theory, absurd and irrational. It is not my intention to suggest that education through post-secondary trade colleges is wholly negative. It is true that many people have had positive experiences and outcomes as a result of attending NSCC. However, it can be a better thing; a more autonomy-driven environment, if it allowed, even in a small sense, room for critical thought. Is it possible for the school to realize "a strong economy [can be] a means to human ends, not an end in itself"? (Nussbaum, 2000, p.11) Cracking open that door, however slightly, may be too dangerous an act for NSCC to withstand.

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