
North American Scholars of Comparative Education

Examining the Work and Influence of
Notable 20th Century Comparativists

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Philip J. Foster

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Philip J. Foster



1927–2008

Philip Foster's father was a leader in a British railroad union. Born on 22 January 1927 in London, Philip Foster grew up with an accent which made it clear that he was born neither to privilege nor wealth. He attended secondary school during World War II. Contrary to popular expectations about his class origins, he advanced to A levels and eventually the London School of Economics and Political Science. He was sponsored by a scholarship from Essex County and specialized in sociology. Foster did post-graduate work at Northwestern (1948–1949) and at the London Institute of Education (1954–1955). He then served as an education officer in the Acholi province of Uganda

(1955–1958) where he met Paula, an anthropologist who later became his wife and mother to his two sons. Foster entered the University of Chicago as a student in 1958 but soon left to become a visiting lecturer at the University of Ghana (1959–1960), where in addition to his teaching he did field work for his PhD dissertation, leading to the award of his degree in 1962. He was appointed assistant professor at the University of Chicago in 1961, a year prior to receiving his PhD. Foster's doctoral dissertation became a book entitled *Education and Social Change in Ghana*, which was awarded the Laing Prize by the University of Chicago Press in 1968 for being the best book written by a faculty member in the previous two years. He was promoted to associate professor in 1964 and full professor in 1968, a rapid rise in the world of University of Chicago scholarship.

In 1978, Foster moved to Sydney, Australia, where he was appointed professor at Macquarie University in 1978 and Dean of the Education School in 1979. In 1981, he returned to the U.S. to become professor in the Department of Education and in the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York at Albany. He served as chair of the Department of Education from 1984 until his retirement in 1986. Philip Foster died in 2008.

Scholarly accomplishments

Because of his long Sub-Saharan Africa experience, Foster's scholarly accomplishments derived in large part from keen observation. His orientation was to challenge commonly held assumptions and widely popular theories.

The difference between socio-economic status and a social class

European and American sociologists assume that wide differences in socio-economic status constitute social classes. Foster argued that the two were different and that Sub-Saharan Africa was characterized by evidence of social mobility and a surprising level of openness. Foster designed and administered the continent's first survey of secondary school students, on which his first book, *Education and Social Change in Ghana*, was based.¹ He argued that 'quite unlike the "stickiness" of the elite gymnasia of Western Europe, the overwhelming majority of the students in the high quality sector come from non-elite backgrounds.'² In their work comparing the Ivory Coast with Ghana, Foster and Remi Clignet showed that contrary to popular belief, the 'elites' in both countries are actually broadly representative of the population.³ Foster's critics once argued that the function of higher education is to place wealthy children into high occupational positions. Foster responded that this view is 'manifestly absurd'; that inequality exists to be sure, but that 75 per cent of the students at the University of Ghana come from non-elite backgrounds and that

it is normal for opportunity.⁴ Education should not be as world. By contr

Colonial legacy

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it is normal for inequality to co-exist simultaneously with massive social opportunity.⁴ Essentially Foster argued that modes of social reproduction should not be assumed to mirror those of Latin America or other parts of the world. By contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa is relatively open.⁵

Colonial legacy and post-independence education

Following independence there was an avalanche of opinion on how African education should escape the confines of colonialism. It was popular to argue for African subjects and institutions to be manifestly different from the past. Foster demurred. He argued that curricular ideologies were unaware that many of the objectives set for the schools were incompatible. While it is natural to have relevant curricula, too much has been made of Africanization interpreted solely as replacing European with African content. He once remarked that 'no magical outcomes may be expected from arithmetic texts that use yams instead of potatoes as units in problems.'⁶ The colonial past was often characterized as being single minded of purpose and implementation. Foster reminded readers that colonial education was hardly uniform; that it vacillated back and forth between assimilationist and adaptationist purposes and goals.⁷ He noted the many calls for Africanization, a switch from classics to local materials and an emphasis on the 'practical'. He pointed out that colonial territories were littered with the wreckage of attempts to give secondary schools a technical or vocational orientation. These were, he argued, either superficial or counter-productive.⁸

In the post-independence period, there were strident calls for each nation to build its own facilities. Foster objected. These calls, he argued, include the hunger for independence but a refusal of outside expertise, even from one's neighbors. He argued that nations were inefficiently duplicating programs, facilities and services; that each wants to own its own complete system of universities, causing an illogical duplication of programs.⁹ Some scholars held that with 'Western-style' universities, African graduates would be divorced from their own cultures. Are African graduates different from their local environments? Of course they are, Foster agreed. But that does not mean that they are alienated from their environments. Colonialism is treated as though it were a dark age for Africa, even in the realm of social, cultural and intellectual development. But no mention is made of what the alternative to colonial institutions might have been.¹⁰ Much is made of the indigenous African Universities of Gao and Timbuktu, but no mention is made of the fact that they were extensions of a more general trend of Islamic centers of learning. Although Foster said that there will be research on African problems and legitimate questions about the assumptions and conclusions reached elsewhere when applied to Africa, much is made of the need to indigenize the university to the African culture when in fact there is no such thing as African economics,

sociology, chemistry or mathematics. It makes no more sense to speak of an African university than an African refrigerator.¹¹

Insight not methods

Foster based conclusions on empirical findings and argued for science not ideology. But he was careful to note that ideologues could be those who used empirical evidence as well as normative exhortation. Many comparative education scholars have written (often worriedly) about methods. Foster was not worried in the slightest because comparative education 'hardly constitutes a discipline'. What it does provide, he argued, is a comparison of common topics and interests using controlled comparison and other normal techniques to elicit insight.¹² Concerning the quantitative/qualitative debate, he argued that one cannot have a productive qualitative discussion without quantitative information. On the other hand, he would remind readers that there are many instances in which historians rather than sociologists are more useful. His reviews of relevant literature included contributions from sociology, social geography, history, anthropology and social psychology while his methods to which he referred originated from geography, history, case studies, large-scale surveys and in-depth ethnographies.¹³ One student says that he gave the most riveting lectures without notes, pacing back and forth with only a piece of chalk. She remembers his lectures on comparative sociology with an ability to connect the histories of caste and class in China, India and Africa.¹⁴ Although Foster was a proponent of cost/benefit analysis and a heavy critic of manpower forecasting, he was quite clear that such research does not yield any obvious policy recommendations.¹⁵

Marxists, Neo-Marxists and de-schooling

The 1970s and 1980s was a time of popular theory. Some prominent scholars argued that schools had a negative impact on society because they reinforced social differences and made it possible for the privileged to maintain their social hegemony. The alternative to formal schooling was outlined by those who argued for 'de-schooling', the establishment of schools which were separated from the formal school hierarchy, not subjected to entrance examinations and controlled by the peasants and poor people themselves.¹⁶ One of Foster's finest hours occurred during his 1971 presidential speech to the Comparative and International Education Society. He used the occasion to address those who supported the views of Ivan Illich and Evertt Reimer by making three points. He agreed that schools are inherently in-egalitarian and subsidize the rich at the expense of the poor. But he pointed out that this was not the whole story because it fails to distinguish individual from societal benefits. He reminded the audience that there are multiple benefits to society even if doctors and scientists stem from privileged social backgrounds. He also agreed that schools are indeed

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instruments of mass conformity; that schools coerce children, restrict creativity and induce passivity. But he then pointed out that all institutions which man has created have a coercive component. That, he says, is the meaning of legitimate authority. To suggest that schools are an agency of conformity is 'platitude'. Last, he suggested that the alternative to schools is never laid out in detail by the 'de-schoolers'. Were de-schoolers in charge, Foster suggested, they would merely substitute the inequalities of current schools for a system of differentiation which would itself be 'even more invidious'.¹⁷

Neo-Marxist commentators criticized Foster's work. In his reply, he pointed out that tackling problems through revolutionary action treated other reforms as though they were only tinkering social engineering, doomed to fail. He believed that it is perfectly possible to achieve social development through pragmatic means. He argued that the Neo-Marxists believed in freedom only so long as the choices people make agree with their own value orientations. Their idea of 'false consciousness' really means that people don't agree with them. Foster was accused of being (what today would be) a 'neo-liberal', a promoter of privatization. But Foster denied being in favor of laissez-faire capitalism and argued that the state should have a very 'considerable role to play in terms of supervisory functions, financial subventions, and direct involvement at all levels of the education system'.¹⁸ Contemporary Marxist approaches are either 'exegetical in nature or based on inferences about what the Master said if he had time to say it...'¹⁹ And besides, most of what Marx argued was better argued by Weber.

For Foster, theory was of the utmost importance. But he warned about theories beginning reasonable but turning into gross ideologies.²⁰ Foster dismissed the theory of the 'Diploma Disease' in one short statement. He said that one should not assume using schools for instrumental reasons constitutes a 'disease'.²¹ Structural-functionalism and Neo-Marxism both constitute 'sociological cul-de-sacs', couched at such a general level that they are 'singularly unhelpful'. Both are based on theories which are 'largely spurious'. One concentrates on market differentiation and efficiency, the other on market imperfections. 'We would do well', he said, 'to abandon the rhetoric altogether'.²² Science, Foster argued, should be distinguished from ideology. Science is an intellectually open system; ideology is an intellectually closed system. Foster agreed with Erwin Epstein that a preoccupation with methodological rigor sometimes prevents us from examining the significance of the questions we ask and the moral implications of research.²³

On being invited to comment on the life of C. Arnold Anderson, Foster made a statement which could also describe his own views. He said that Anderson was 'skeptical concerning the pretensions of governments and the supposed benefits of revolutionary change; he was a streak of Puritan morality, anti-technological in emphasis, and had a profound objection to central planning'.²⁴

Values of the scholar and 'planner'

Foster hated manpower planning with a passion. Its assumptions were patronizing. Planners and the scholars argued that certain types of education were more important regardless of whether people wanted them because people were irrational in terms of deciding educational preferences. He found fault with manpower techniques such as polls of large companies to determine future needs, census data and models which attempt to predict the 'needs' of developing countries by using templates from fully developed economies. He argued that manpower plans are so vague that they can provide no guidance, or so strict that they must rely on coercion to achieve them.²⁵ It is not, he says, the task of the planner to decide what people ought to want rather than to suggest the most expeditious means of achieving what people have already decided they want. Planning should be based on people's aspirations. People do not send their children to school for the good of the state. The returns to education are so high with respect to employment in the formal sector of the economy that peasants send their children to school so that they may have the opportunity to leave the village rather than remain there as farmers. This doesn't mean that they don't respect farming. It means that it is irrational to expect them to choose a life of certain and desperate poverty when other options might be available.²⁶ Planners must capitalize on people's rational self-interest for the benefit of all, by looking at education as an investment by an individual for his own future.²⁷ Manpower planning is based on an 'ecological fallacy' in which a planner launches into a set of conclusions remote from the realities of the data in support of their own planning agendas.²⁸

Sacred cows brought down

Foster was singularly effective when all alone, when all around him believed the opposite. Arguments over curriculum were somewhat pointless he said, because the most crucial thing about Western education in Africa is not the content of what a school teaches but rather that one has been to school when a large proportion of the population has not.²⁹ African school leavers are not naïve about their life chances. They are no more unrealistic than students in any other part of the world. In fact, they are remarkably candid and specific about the costs and potential benefits.³⁰

Many scholars believed that the key to development was literacy. Countries who could boost the rate of literacy in the population will stand a better chance of economic development. Should governments invest in large-scale literacy campaigns? Foster was not so sure. Is it not a human right that children should be taught in the language of their home? Foster argued that it is not necessarily the case that teaching in the mother tongue is, in the end, beneficial. Teaching in mother tongues divides a nation. It adds unaffordable costs. Even in rural areas of Africa it is normal to find many languages in

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classrooms.³¹ Teaching in the mother tongue is simply unfeasible. Moreover, teaching in mother tongues is opposed by people whose main ambition is to their children's mastery of an international language. Unitary strategies of national language may cause rebellion, but pluralist approaches may further fragment the political culture.³² Many scholars assumed that governments were well intentioned and represented the public good. Many treat the state as a savior. Foster replied that market-oriented or not, there is no development theory which begins with the premise that the state is predatory and not development-oriented.³³

Enormous changes occurred over Foster's lifetime in terms of new data on education achievement. Are we wiser for it? Do we have answers we didn't have in the past? Foster commented that we know a great deal more about educational performance than we did three decades ago, but that discussion about the ends of educational policy had not improved. Research may tell policy makers what is sociologically possible, but it cannot inform them about what is desirable.³⁴ Educators hate selection examinations. But instead of belly-aching about them, Foster concentrated on what was feasible. He conceded that examinations may have a deleterious effect on instruction. On the other hand, he reminded readers that standardized examinations may be infinitely preferable than alternative methods of status allocation – military force, inheritance, purchase by the rich, or random chance.³⁵

The fallacy of vocational education in development planning

In 1966, an atomic bomb exploded on American education with the publication of the Coleman Report.³⁶ It argued, in essence, that money invested in school quality makes little difference to academic achievement; what makes the difference is the socio-economic status and other characteristics of the pupil external to the school. American educators were outraged, and remain so today.

Foster's publication on the "Vocational School Fallacy in Development Planning" had a similar impact on the development community as the Coleman Report had on the education community in the United States. It was controversial from its birth. Originally it was given as a speech to point out the mistakes of the 'education for self-reliance' strategy of President Julius Nyerere.³⁷ From the speech it changed into an article and was reprinted in dozens of places. It stirred near-violent reactions because it flew in the face of every known wisdom: (i) that education was overly academic; (ii) that school leavers were unrealistic about their job prospects; (iii) that school leavers would become disgruntled and would become a nuisance to the state; (iv) that young people in rural areas should stay in rural areas and be farmers instead of seeking employment in the cities in spite of the fact that the earnings from formal sector employment were many times more than would could be gained as a farmer; (v) that the Western curriculum was 'overly academic'; and (vi) that

pupils sought it because they were seeking the status equivalent to previous colonial administrators. As an idea, the vocational school fallacy was manifestly unpopular, subject to multiple re-analyses, critiques, defenses and explanations.³⁸ It was eventually cited in 637 other publications. When Foster was invited to explain the vocational school fallacy to the Ministers of Education from Senegal and Zimbabwe, they listened with great attention but discomfort. When he finished there was a long silence. The Minister Dzingai Mutumbuka spoke first. He said:

I hate this argument. This is stupid. It goes against everything I have been taught, everything I have observed in my own country and everything which I believe in. *But...* it is interesting.³⁹

Here is what King and Martin say about why this argument was so unusual:

This article went to the heart of the long-running (and continuing) debate about whether schools and their curricula can influence society through changing student attitudes towards jobs and work – or whether schools and their pupils are themselves much more influenced by the surrounding economy and by the patterns of work and rewards that exist in the surrounding areas. Arguably, there have been very few articles in the field of international and comparative education that have been so influential in academic circles, and also amongst some development co-operation personnel. In a period when it was all too easy to claim that schools could deliver all kinds of attitude change (towards building good citizenship and rural development), he countered that 'schools are remarkably clumsy' instruments for inducing prompt, large scale changes.⁴⁰

One common misunderstanding of Foster's 'vocational fallacy' argument concerned his attitude toward vocational education itself. He wasn't against vocational education. What he was against was the use of vocational education as ideology. He particularly did not like the practice of forcing a curriculum down the throats of those who clearly didn't want it on the grounds that central curricular authorities knew more about what the student needed than the student and their families.⁴¹ Because it was so common to misunderstand or misconstrue his vocational school fallacy argument, Foster once lamented writing it. He said, 'I wish sometimes I had never written that confounded piece, for it has been quoted out of context so many times.'⁴²

In the 1980s, the debate itself shifted slightly from the vocational school fallacy to the implications of a new and important player in the field of education financing, The World Bank. For the first 18 years of the Education Sector lending to secondary education, the Bank required countries to 'diversify' the curricula, to instill wood and metal shops, agriculture and (gulp) domestic science for females.⁴³ This was challenged by evaluations which demonstrated that

the workshops were unit expenditures were high, and the utilization for the leaving certificate was not fully utilized.⁴⁴

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the workshops were not utilized, that equipment was wasted; that per-pupil unit expenditures were doubled, and by contrast academic subjects in preparation for the leaving examinations were over-filled and their resources were fully utilized.⁴⁴

Subsequently, emphasis shifted to revising policies at the World Bank.⁴⁵ These began with a seminar sponsored for African education ministers, but then developed into new policy strategies.⁴⁶ Foster reflected on these signs of flexibility and was pleased with them.⁴⁷ These initiatives then stimulated a virtual avalanche of policy review, revision and innovation.⁴⁸ Common to each of these reviews was the emphasis on diverse methods of delivery, financing and governance including a stronger ownership of the curriculum by employers. One observer seemed surprised and pleased to announce that in spite of the heavy criticisms stimulated by Foster, the World Bank continued to invest in vocational and technical training.⁴⁹ The first education sociologist to be hired at the World Bank was Jack Maas. Here is his summary.

In my view Phil Foster has had a greater influence on the thinking of the World Bank than any other member of faculty from any university. He helped the Bank question its deepest, most cherished assumptions. The strengths of his arguments rested on logic and keen observation rather than any pioneering empirical model. In this way he spoke to all staff and to all countries, without the need for a statistical interpreter. The Bank, and development education is in a much stronger position that it could have achieved without the thinking of Phil Foster, and there are many individuals in far-away places who stand grateful for his contribution.⁵⁰

Professional impact

Ndri Assie-Lumumba, a past-president of CIES, once described Foster's impact on her personally.

Philip Foster had a deep and refined understanding of Africa, navigating the complexity and dynamism of social processes in different ethnic communities and administrative and political units of historical and contemporary periods across the big continent... He brilliantly analyzed... the responses of Africans to colonial rule, the clashes of cultures and the subsequent establishments of the European types of educational systems. Professor Foster had a genuine affection for the Africans and a profound respect for the African culture with all its contradictions and glories, just like any other culture... He had neither a condescending attitude nor paternalist instincts.⁵¹

Jeffrey Puryear, Vice President for Social Policy at the Inter-American Dialogue, describes Foster's impact on him in the following way:

Some, perhaps most of Phil's points challenged conventional wisdom. Phil did that a lot. And I got the message: some part of what we blithely assume to be true doesn't pass muster when subjected to careful, empirical analysis. I learned from him that conventional wisdom should be taken with a grain of salt, and subjected to scrutiny... Phil taught me that qualitative analysis was just as good as quantitative analysis. He altered my view, not with arguments, but simply by having me read *some* first-rate qualitative work. He urged us to go beyond the easy *comfort* of fashionable ideas and to seek instead 'solid reality'.⁵²

Daniel Levy, Distinguished Professor at the State University of New York at Albany was a colleague to Philip Foster. Here is what he has to say as to Foster's impact:

I can't remember an occasion in which he didn't have an opinion, usually a strong one, often a *very* strong one. I usually agreed with him, if not initially then after listening to his forceful logic. Phil taught a course in *Social Analysis in Education*... It covers anthropology, sociology, economics and political science. Phil, of course, had a sparkling mastery of all. Such erudition, evident in all he did, was unsurpassed. How many faculty members in Education have had his breadth of knowledge and his profound intellect?... Phil never appeared to care about the personal consequences of statements or actions he believed in. This was integrity. I haven't met many people like that in or out of academia. Nor did he calculate for personal advantage. It was about straight thinking and advocating what made sense.⁵³

Did Foster have a temper? Yes, but it took a serious transgression for it to be stimulated. There was one occasion, observed by Daniel Levy, when Foster blew his top. The incident involved his working-class background. Here is how Levy describes it: There was one night at this conference

when all the participants got pretty loaded. Among them was a seemingly upper-class Brit, tough person, who chided Phil for maintaining his working-class manner of speaking when he could clearly 'do better'. Talk about getting more than you bargained for! Phil laced into her with a passion I've rarely seen in academia. With keen distaste. Clearly a nerve had been touched. The honest man, powerfully proud of who he was and where he came from, not about to take any crap from anyone. Phil always loathed the pretentious. He never ascribed to politically correct viewpoints on equity and was rather derisive of self-nominated do-gooders who presumed to know about the poor. He was unafraid to lambast anyone from any group, which was a reliable reflection of how unprejudiced he was.⁵⁴

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When meeting a soldier from a long-ago war it might be forgiven if a youngster is unfamiliar with the details of battle. Many of today's readers will be unfamiliar with the issues described here. However unfamiliar, it makes the battle no less ferocious and no less a source for lessons. Foster argued against many of the most popular but incorrect assumptions about education and development. Manpower forecasting was once the dominant methodology across national and international development agencies; no longer. It was once assumed that the 'most practical' education focused on specific technical skills, such as farming or machine work, rather than liberal exposure to arts and letters, and that this was particularly true in Africa. No longer. It was assumed that peasants and poor people generally would not have the wherewithal to know their own interests, would make irrational choices and should therefore be moved according to central plans rather than personal choice. Today this is regarded as patronizing. It was once debated whether the central function of schooling merely reproduced social arrangements, or whether it might help break down these arrangements. This is no longer a central debate because it is now universally acknowledged that the poor want and deserve access to schooling and to status attainment just like everyone else. It was once argued that children should be educated in their mother tongue. Today the costs and political ramifications of this view are better understood. Political independence from colonialism was once thought to be the final objective, and the motivation for localization of curriculum and curricular purposes. Today colonialism is fading as the primary explanation for the mistakes of the present. Educational planning has become more pragmatic with respect to the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in an interdependent economy. It was once debated whether qualitative or quantitative methods were inherently superior. Foster helped persuade us that, at best, both offer insight; at worst, neither does. Foster's work helped make these advances possible.

As a person he was polite but firm. Some mistook vigor for a lack of empathy. Those who knew him never made this mistake. He was a brilliant teacher and could regale a class with stories from ancient Chinese examinations to the way a market woman in Ghana calculates profit. Jan Currie says, 'I will always remember Phil Foster as a demanding supervisor, an inspiring scholar and the most provocative lecturer I have ever had in the three universities I attended.'⁵⁵ He was honest and principled, and passed these characteristics to students as forcefully as the assigned readings. His character was as powerful a pedagogical tool as his lectures.

Philip Foster could not easily have existed outside of the university. That his work was often unpopular serves as an example of the importance of maintaining the university as an independent and professional center of inquiry. These institutions hold our greatest hope that the world may continue to see more individuals of Foster's caliber, and that, against all odds, they may

continue to challenge and extend our understanding of the relationship between education and human development.

Notes

- 1 Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana*, 1965.
- 2 Foster, Secondary Schooling and Social Mobility in a West African Nation, 1963, p. 156
- 3 Clignet and Foster, *French and British Colonial Education in Africa*, 1964; 'Potential Elites in Ghana and the Ivory Coast: A Preliminary Comparison,' 1964.
- 4 Foster, Education and Manpower Planning: A Cautionary Note, 1967
- 5 Foster, Educational Policies of Post-Colonial States, 1982
- 6 Foster, Problems of Educational Development, 1972, p. 58.
- 7 Clignet and Foster, Potential Elites in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, 1964; Foster, Educational Policies of Post-Colonial States, 1982; Clignet and Foster, The Fortunate Few, 1966
- 8 Foster, Secondary Education: Objectives and Differentiation, 1969
- 9 Foster and Anderson, Potentials for Federation of East African Education Programs, 1965
- 10 Foster, The Nigerian Tragedy, 1970
- 11 Foster, False and Real Problems of African Universities, 1975
- 12 Foster et. al. The Egva Survey, 1959/1960; Foster, Comparative Methodology and the Study of African Education, 1960.
- 13 Foster, Education and Social Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1980
- 14 Currie, My Tribute to Phil Foster, 2008
- 15 Foster, Economic Development and Education, 1985
- 16 In 1975, Neo-Marxists demanded that the World Bank leave the Education Sector altogether.
- 17 Foster, Presidential Address: The Revolt Against the Schools, 1971
- 18 Foster, Commentary on the Commentaries, 1975, p. 425.
- 19 Foster, In the steps of the master?, 1981, pp. 465-466
- 20 Dore, The Diploma Disease, 1976
- 21 Foster, Why the Issue of 'Relevance' Is Not So Relevant, 1989; Foster, Education, Economy and Equality, 1971. Once Ronald Dore confessed to me that he had written the 'Diploma Disease' as a joke. He never took the diploma disease seriously but then when it became popular, he thought it was too late to actually admit it. In this way, he played the part of a hypocrite, not the kind of hypocrite who is inconsistent with his own moral principles, but the kind of hypocrite who plays a role and acts a part knowing full well that the role he is playing is inconsistent with his own principles. The tragedy for international education is that there have been so many, and so many prominent, scholars who seemed to have no idea that Dore's ideas about the 'diploma disease' were meant to be humorous.
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