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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Graham, Philip W. & Sunderland, Naomi (1998) The role of academic community in higher learning : Alternatives to a drive-thru education. In *Proceedings of The Third Pacific Rim Conference*, Auckland Institute of Technology, Auckland.

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The role of academic community in higher learning: Alternatives to a drive-thru education

Naomi Sunderland and Phil Graham
Queensland University of Technology

The purpose of our paper is to illustrate the fundamental importance of developing academic community among first-year students. We argue that a sense of academic community is of fundamental importance in combating the effects of the neo-liberal economic discourse on higher education, and that the values of higher education are incongruent with those of economic rationalism. The discursive commodification of the student, and of education itself, works against the formation of community, both within the university environment and in the wider society. We argue that, at present, the dominant discourse shaping the social practice of higher education is that of neo-liberal economics. Community values stand in opposition to the dominant discourse, and are integral to the long-term survival of a socially critical and socially responsive society. We conclude that the importance of establishing a sense of academic community during the first year of university is justified by its ultimate value to society.

Introduction: The social practice of higher education

In analysing the effects of economic rationalism on today's university, we adopt Peter Isaacs' (1998) view of social institutions as *social practices*. Isaacs' social practice framework accentuates the university's perceived role in society by viewing higher education as a socially constructed, socially constituted, and socially embedded¹ network of discourse communities (Isaacs, 1998, p. 3). As such, we use Isaacs' framework to contrast the university's currently perceived role in society with its traditionally understood role in society. The social practice framework is useful in critically analysing the higher education system because it reveals the central role of the university in shaping neophyte members' ways of seeing and acting through the discursive processes of socialisation.

In our view, the discourse of economic rationalism is now entrenched in higher education to the point at which the social practice of higher education is *totalised* by the influence of neo-liberal, or economic rationalist, ideology. As evidence of this assertion, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of neophyte members' descriptions of their experiences in the modern "rationalised" university. The studies we analyse are the *Student Focus Project on QUT Services* (Brenders, Hope, & Ninan, 1996) and *Communication in the School of Communication* (Kerr, Rudge, & Sunderland, 1997).

In our analysis, we show that the ultimate effect of economic rationalism is that members of the social practice are forced to identify, not the with values of education, but with the values and objectives defined by economic rationalism. We conclude, therefore, that students entering higher education must be offered an alternative to the current economically oriented agenda for higher education. We propose that the best alternative is an academic community that promotes students' and staff's self-critical reflection upon their university experiences, their academic discipline, and the university's wider role in society. Central to this is the development of critical awareness of the language, thought, and values associated with economic rationalism. We propose that initiating students into an academic community, particularly during the first year of higher education, is vital to provide self-critical development and support and to ensure students and staff experience alternatives to the isolating, individualistic, and competitive values of economic rationalism.

¹ The socially embedded nature of social practices is defined by Isaacs as the way in which social practices 'exist within broader social settings and alongside other social practices' (1998, p. 7).

The values of higher education versus the values of economic rationalism

Polemic attitudes about the role of higher education in society are well evidenced in current debates (Cf. Allen, 1992; Billington, 1991; Crittenden, 1997; Dudley, 1995; Graham, 1998; Korb, Kopp, & Allison, 1997; Stilwell, 1998; Wheelwright, 1993). O'Shea, Emmett, and Coventry (1996) regard the proliferation of economic rationalism in the higher education system as evidence of the current 'totality' of market economics' influence on 'all aspects of personal and social life' (p. 2). The effect of this ideological *totalisation* on higher education institutions, they argue, has been a shift away from the university's traditional academic values to those of economic rationalism (1996, p. 2). Through this shift, university education is now viewed largely as a 'process of qualification' through which the government seeks "return" on its investment of public money in education (Allen, 1992, p. 889). John Dawkins exemplifies this view in the 1987 green paper in which he states that 'input without output is classed as failure' (1987, quoted in Allen, 1992, p. 890).

Behind the shift toward a production-based consumerist higher education system is an imperative for change and reform. The reformist agenda is exemplified in the recently released West Review on Higher Education (Department of Employment, Education, Training, and Youth Affairs [DEETYA], 1998). In their final report, the review committee conclude that:

'Australia's universities must transcend local, sectional interests and the historical perception of their role as educators to become major partners in further promoting a world-class education industry that can play an even wider role in deriving the growth of our economy' (DEETYA, 1998, p. 17).

The transcendence of universities' 'historical perception of their role as educators' includes the transcendence of traditional academic values of higher education in favour of the "production" of qualified graduates "fit" for efficient and productive participation in the Australian economy rather than as a 'social good' which is integral to society itself (Cf. Allen 1992; Dudley, 1995, p. 1; O'Shea, Emmett, & Coventry, 1996, p. 1; Frank Stilwell, phone conversation, May 20, 1998).

Despite its seemingly traditional and conservative intentions, we join others in arguing that the West Review is consistent with the economic rationalist trend in higher education policy because it focuses on an agenda of 'narrow economic concerns' (Margetson, 1994, p. 9). The agenda Margetson describes is widely criticised because it offers little or no regard to either the currently devalued intrinsic rewards of higher education, or the subversion of the humanitarian role of higher education in society (Cf. Crittenden, 1997; Margetson, 1994, p. 9; Thompson, 1991). The conforming nature of the review is exemplified in the review's final report which states that a key requirement of higher education is to prepare graduates 'to play a productive role in an outwardly oriented, knowledge-based economy', and to 'revolutionise the management processes of universities and the education *products* that universities provide' (DEETYA, 1998, p. 17, our emphasis).

The disparity between the neo-liberal motives for change and the humanist view of role of higher education in society is most evident when West himself attempts to reconcile the review's economic motives for change with the "goal" of the review explicated in the report's foreword. West states that the goal of the review is to develop a system that will 'produce men and women who are fully, lovingly, and confidently human' (West, 1998, p. 5). Hayward (1997) however, notes the speed with which West manages to switch from the humanist language used in the foreword to that of 'genuine economic rationalism' (p. 98). Stilwell (1998) concurs with this assessment and identifies the economic rationalist rhetoric in West's, claiming that 'there is a need for further freeing up of the education sector' and that 'deregulation strategies must prepare the existing institutions for a more competitive environment' (p. 7).

Meyenn and Parker (1991) identify the characteristic values of economic rationalism as being committed to more individual 'initiative and responsibility'; less state provision; an 'emphasis on efficiency rather than social justice or equity'; and a public policy platform 'dominated by business ideology' that propounds profit, productivity, and output (p. 2). Economic rationalism as a discourse, method, and ideology adopts technocratic² values which 'completely leave behind the specifically human world' (Oakeshott, quoted in Saul, 1997, p. 88). What the *science* of economics requires, according to Oakeshott, is complete separation from a 'vocabulary which suggests this [human] world' (in Saul, 1997, p. 88). The political and societal significance of Oakeshott's claims to objectivity is encapsulated by Lemke (1995) who maintains that 'those who practice it [technocratic strategy] present a policy as if it

² By technocrats, we mean those who transform 'discourses of expert knowledge into discourses of social policy' (Lemke, 1995, p. 58). Economic rationalism, as a form of technocratic discourse, is widely perceived as being value-free (Pusey, 1991, p. 68). The notion of 'value-free' *decision making* refers to the way in which "technocrats" 'mistakenly assume that their choices and decisions are decided purely upon objective, technical criteria and are, in this sense, value free' (Pusey, 1991, p. 68).

were directly dictated by matters of fact [that] deflect considerations of value choices and the social, moral, and political responsibility of such choices' (p. 58). What Oakeshott's typically neo-liberal discourse creates, then, is a 'dualism...between economic and social issues' (Stilwell 1993, p. 36).

The conceptual implication of the dualism identified by Stilwell is described by Strachan (1998a) as a Modern opposition of the rational and emotional components of decision making. According to Strachan, 'the rational in economic rationalism comes from philosophy where it means *guided by reason* as opposed to *emotions*' (1998a). In defining the term *emotions*, he includes 'consideration for people, sympathy for the plight of human beings, [and] ethical considerations' (1998a). The effect of this perceived dualism between the rational and the emotional is that the *emotive* is necessarily 'excluded from the economic equation as a matter of policy', and thus is communicated as being secondary to technocratic rationality (Strachan, 1998a). Consonant with Warehime (1993), we argue that the predominance of such 'technicization' in higher education policy has, in some cases, 'turned universities into training grounds which create few spaces for genuine seekers of knowledge' (p. 62).

Effects on future citizens and discourse community members: Economic rationalism's "utility" function

By acknowledging that social practices are both constructed and constituted by persons, Isaacs raises particular attention to the notion of how we form social institutions from within, and in turn, how they form us (Bellah et al., 1992, in Isaacs, 1998, p. 3). In the university setting, this impedes students in developing, what May (1992) calls, the *socially responsive self*³, and so has serious implications for graduates in their future roles as professionals and, indeed, as citizens. May concludes that 'ideas or categories from an institution pervade an individual's conception of his or her life so that the individual conceives of his or her life in terms of the dominant categories of the institution' (p. 82). Pusey (1991, p. 68) identifies the degree to which economic rationalist values, in the guise of technocratic neutrality, shape the ways of seeing and acting within the social practice of administration in "rational" institutions:

'Policy making, top management, and higher administration are labels that we apply to a form of work in which the individuals' total consciousness (and unconsciousness) - knowledge, 'ideas', values, and attitudes - are turned into what these actors themselves recognise as another more impersonal and objectified universe of policies, formal structures, and organisational processes.'

The situation arises then, that economic rationalist ideology - which assumes fundamental dualism between economic and societal issues - pervades the *ideas, structures, and categories* of the university. As a result, students' conceptions of their life and self are, by default, largely shaped by the language and practice of economic rationalism with all its incumbent values. In his study of the effects of economic rationalism in Australian government policy, Pusey confirms that students in higher education experience the colonising effect we describe (1991, p. 172). Pusey's data shows that 'family, schooling, and especially university educational backgrounds still have an enduring effect in shaping the social and political dispositions of our top public servants more than twenty years later' (1991, p. 172).

These same public servants and policy makers posit an education which 'fits' graduates for participation to an abstract, socially estranged 'market' (Dudley, 1995, p. 1; Margetson, 1994, p. 1), thereby advancing society's economic prosperity (Crittenden, 1997; p. 29). As such, a market-based education system is viewed by policy makers as a source of societal betterment solely for the reason that it supposedly contributes to the efficient functioning of the economy⁴ (O'Shea, Emmett, & Coventry, 1996, p. 16; Marginson, 1997a, p. 107). This narrow view of societal betterment, however, is contingent on distributive justice being inherent in economic growth and prosperity (Cf. Rees, Rodley, & Stilwell, 1993). Economic rationalism has, however, been proven *not* to promote social justice in recent studies conducted by the United Nations: The studies confirm that, in reality, economic growth seldom 'trickles down' to lower socio-economic levels (Cf. Saul, 1992, 1997; United Nations Human Development Report, 1990, in Wheelwright, 1993, p. 41). The 'trickle down' argument is, by many accounts, fallacious in assuming that societal benefits - even in purely monetary terms - will arise from an increased

³ The *socially responsive self* is co-defined as (i) the notion that selves are socially constituted, that is, that they are responsive to, and embedded within, the groups and communities of which they are members; and (ii) the way that selves conceive of themselves morally in response to the contexts and situations they find themselves in (p. 2).

⁴ That is, of course, assuming that economic growth and prosperity may actually be attributed to economic rationalist policies. There is significant evidence to suggest otherwise (Cf. Wheelwright, 1993; Saul, 1997, Strachan, 1998b).

“rationalisation” of higher education, or, for that matter, in any industry sector (Cf. Graham, 1998; Saul, 1992, 1997).

A disturbing function of the economic rationalist approach to education in Australia is its effect on societal and student perceptions of education itself. Universities in Australia - increasingly underfunded by OECD standards - are educating less people to poorer standards in increasingly corporate oriented curricula, apparently with the aim of providing more employable graduates to the business sector (Crossweller, 1998; Healy, 1998a; 1998b; Egan, 1998, Korb et al, 1997). The purpose of Universities has traditionally been to teach critical thought, advance societal knowledge and culture, and therefore, advance society as a whole –not to provide corporations with semi-trained graduates (Billington, 1993, p. 39-40; Graham, 1998; Saul, 1997, pp. 68-69). The education-system-as-corporate-training-ground syndrome is reaching down to its own roots. Phil Gude, the Victorian minister for Education, proposes that Victorian children begin preparation for employment whilst at school (Busfield, 1998). To aid this end, Gude proposes that schools be opened every day of the year, that the participation of businesses in shaping curricula be encouraged, and that schools scrap their libraries in favour of computer mediated access to information (Busfield, 1998). Gude’s proposal is analogous to book burning on a grand scale, and indicates an extravagant ignorance of the capabilities of information technology (Graham, 1998; Korb, Kopp, & Allison, 1997).

The reality of a technologically driven, corporatist curricula is that the education, in itself, does not create the job for which it is designed, the result being that Australian society currently enjoys a much more highly-trained, growing class of unemployed people (Fife-Yeomans, 1998). The fickle nature of the market is also at issue where market-based education is concerned: There is no guarantee that the job training will remain current for any length of time, especially if jobs are to be increasingly technologically oriented: A technologically oriented, skills-based curriculum has a built-in redundancy: that of the rapidly changing technologies on which current curricula are based (Graham, 1998; Saul 1997, p. 69). The fact of a continually growing and increasingly highly-trained number of unemployed people in Australian society defies both market and societal logic.

Because of the totality of the economic rationalist discourse, many students are imbued with the ethics of competitive individualism, uncritical rationality in the context of their chosen discipline, and a perception of employment scarcity, prior to entering the higher education system. Therefore, they view themselves - with the encouragement of the modern university - as “clients” purchasing a “product” that will be “in demand” in an abstract “market”. Such a view, we argue, ultimately both students and academic staff, and erodes the development of academic community. Furthermore, we argue that such self-descriptions and perceptions held by entering students, which are reinforced and capitalised upon by the “rationalised” higher education system, further damage the students’ experience of higher education and society itself.

The discourse of economic utility that predominates in society in general, and higher education in particular, shapes the way students in transition from tertiary to higher education see themselves in the learning relationship, the role of higher education in society, and their roles as citizens in the wider community. New members of the “rationalised” higher education system are socialised, or rather colonised, so as to ‘identify with and gain entry to a social practice’ (Isaacs, 1998, p. 6): That is, the process by which ‘shared beliefs, actions, and commitments’ are reproduced within the social practice of an uncritical, skills-based education (Isaacs, 1998, p.6). Socialisation is central in shaping the ‘interpretive schemes’ of neophyte members in accordance with those generally held by existing members (Frost & Egri, 1991, p. 242). Frost & Egri (1991) identify socialisation as a deeply political process through which those members in positions of power ‘guide the individual and organisational learning of what they deem to be appropriate (and inappropriate) values, beliefs, and behaviours’ (Schein, 1985, in Frost and Egri, 1991, p. 242).

To demonstrate the extent to which students and the higher education system itself are colonised by economic rationalism, we critically analyse discourses produced by students from the Queensland University of Technology that are recorded in two separate studies spanning a period of eighteen months.

Analysis: The presentational, attitudinal, and organisational aspects of discourse

In analysing selected discourses, we use Lemke's (1995) *Textual Politics* model of sociolinguistics. Lemke, drawing on Bakhtin's (1929/1986, in Lemke 1995, p. 22) theory of 'intertextuality', asserts that a discourse community can be identified by the way it describes the world and its interactions because '[e]ach community, each discourse tradition, has its own canons of intertextuality⁵, its own principles and customs regarding which texts are most relevant to the interpretation of any one text' (1995, p. 41). Lemke's model examines three aspects of discourse:

- Presentational: How language is used to construct things in the natural or social domains by their 'explicit descriptions as participants, processes, relations and circumstances standing in particular semantic relations to one another';
- Attitudinal: How the discourse community orients itself attitudinally to others, and to the presentational content of its own discourse, and;
- Organisational: The organisational 'construction of relations between elements of the discourse itself' (Lemke 1995, p. 41, our emphasis).

In defining the role of language in a discourse community, Killingsworth and Gilbertson exemplify the concept of a self-perpetuating discourse as one 'by which communities develop and advance their agendas of action, build solidarity, patrol and extend their boundaries, and perpetuate themselves in the life of a general culture' (Killingsworth and Gilbertson, in McKenna 1997, p. 191).

A theory of discursively constructed and maintained social entities necessarily extends to view the effects of a discourse community's social environment upon its own descriptions about itself and vice versa (Lemke 1995, pp. 37-39; van Dijk 1994, p. 110). Lemke asserts that, within a discourse community, '*thematic patterns* ... recur from text to text in slightly different wordings, but [are] recognisably the same, and can be mapped onto a generic semantic pattern that is the same for all' texts about a particular theme (1995, p. 42, original emphasis). This being the case, Lemke's discourse theory provides a useful tool by which to analyse the descriptive, attitudinal and organisational aspects of a discourse community (Lemke 1995, pp. 99-105).

Using Lemke's framework, we show the totalising effect of the economic rationalist discourse upon students' descriptions of themselves and the social context in which they find themselves, and the descriptions of higher education produced by the institution and its staff members. In doing so, we show the high degree of alignment to economic rationalist values by both the student and the institution.

Student focus project report on QUT services

The student focus project addresses the question: 'What is the student experience of everything in the university other than teaching?' (Brenders et al, 1996, p. 1). From a critical perspective, the exclusive nature of the question exemplifies the dualist, rationalist, corporatist view of higher education we outline above. The study, itself, positions students as consumers of services, including those of teaching. A further assumption of the study question is that 'teaching', as a service, may be separated from everything else that the student experiences in gaining their 'impression of QUT as a service provider' (p. 1).

By making these assumptions, the study marginalises the role of higher education by promoting an unconsciousness of social, economic, and political issues, into which the student is drawn as a result of the 'inflated rhetoric' of economic rationality (Kaighin, 1993); a rationality that gives 'primacy to "the economy", second place to the political order, and third place to the social order' (Pusey, 1991, p. 10).

If the higher education system is to be projected as an economic producer, exporter, or service industry, the actual product or service being offered for consumption needs to be clarified (Watkins, 1996, p. 94). There are currently no distinct definitions of the "product" on offer from either proponents or critics of the view which sees higher education as a "producer" or service provider. Marginson (1997b) begins a definition by making the following observation:

'It had become an education market... in which students and parents were consumers, teachers and academics were producers, and educational administrators had become managers and entrepreneurs' (p. 5).

By positioning the student as a client who purchases services, including teaching, a false assumption is built in to the relationship between the student and the university: that an education can be

⁵ Lemke (1995, p. 22) follows Bakhtin's (1929/1986) definition of the word 'intertextuality': That is, the heteroglossia - the spectrum of thematic choices - from which a discourse community typically chooses in interpreting and describing its world, and the way the discourse community relates to the heteroglossia in which it is embedded.

bought. In making such an assumption, the responsibility for producing “uneducated” - or failed - students must fall to the institution for providing a “faulty” or inadequate service.

Student-as-client

The student-as-client discourse, an epiphenomenon of economic rationalism in higher education, is well-evidenced among students interviewed in the Student Focus study:

‘[I expect] to be treated like a customer. I work in the sales industry and I know some of the experiences I’ve had at this university –I would never treat a customer like that. It is not that they’re treating us as bad customers, it is just that they don’t even recognise us as customers. We’re just students and that’s it’ (James, economics student, p. 38).

‘I think professionalism is a big thing ... Being in the service industry and a lot of more professional things it’s like, “Yeah, we’ve got to do this. We’ve got to please the customer”. And I see myself as a customer to [sic]’ (Bruno, construction management, p. 37).

Both these students equate the social practice of higher education with their own roles as sales and service professionals. They see themselves as ‘customers’ buying a ‘product’ or ‘service’. Therefore, they implicitly assume that they are *outside* the higher education system; that they are buying a consumable good - an education - which is extrinsic to them. The assumption that education can be bought on contract, rather than engaged in as a social experience, fundamentally subverts higher education itself by descriptively commodifying it as an object of consumption.

In regarding themselves as clients, students discursively fracture the relationship between themselves and the learning process. In fracturing this relationship, the student-as-client view of education invalidates higher education itself which, in order to *be* education, requires an engaged educational relationship between students, lecturers, institutions, and the wider society; not a dismembered, objectified, one-sided relationship in which the responsibility for education rests solely with the ‘service provider’ (Brenders et al, p. 1). Therefore, as demonstrated by the language used by James and Bruno, a higher education system in which students are viewed - and view themselves - as clients, does not, and *cannot* exist. This is because the social practice of higher education is constituted by persons engaged in education relationships in an educational context. If students and universities discursively withdraw from the socially engaged nature of the educative relationship by objectifying education itself, then the practice, by definition, ceases to exist. That is to say, when there students are replaced with clients, the practice of higher education *cannot* exist.

The descriptive, attitudinal, and organisational aspects of Bruno and James’s comments show the way the student-as-client discourse creates and maintains a dualistically demarcated, rational higher education system that fundamentally undermines the socially embedded social practice of higher education. The students describe their education as a ‘service’ and themselves as its dissociated ‘customers’. In this respect, their attitudes are explicitly consonant with the market view of consumer primacy at the point of purchase, the archetypal marketing assumption being that “the customer is always right”.

The most significant organisational elements of Bruno and James’s discourses include Bruno and James themselves, their relationship with the higher education system, its responsibility to them, and its societal context. These elements are discursively organised by James and Bruno according to the rationality of the market: The enthronement of the customer - manifest demand - is discursively constructed as being dualistically opposed to the concept of the “mere” student; The dualistic elements of the market economy, neatly divided into producers and consumers, is juxtaposed to the inefficient bureaucracy of a university that subjugates the interests of students and which will benefit from increased professionalism; Bruno’s reference to the professionalism of the ‘service industry’ - an often-used euphemism for the semi-skilled domain of the hospitality sector - is compared with higher education: Higher education, according to Bruno, requires the level of ‘professionalism’ found in customer-focused, managerialist organisations. Such a view of higher education is fundamentally flawed and damaging to the practice. As Meyenn and Parker (1991) point out: ‘Education is not a hamburger’.

Nevertheless, the QUT, like many other “rationalised” universities, promotes a drive-thru mentality among its students. By promoting, and, indeed, by capitalising upon the student-as-client view of higher education, the rationalised university reinforces economic rationalist values. Because the values of economic rationalism stand in opposition to those of academic community, the student experience is relegated to the status of a drive-thru education: The drive-thru mentality reinforces a get-in-get-what-you-need-and-get-out anonymity amongst students. Martin’s words exemplify the phenomenon: ‘I try to come and go as quickly as possible. It doesn’t really feel like a university’ (Brenders et al, 1996, p. 10). Jim, a law student, expands upon the drive-thru theme, saying that:

'I feel like I don't belong to a university, but rather I seem to come along to these buildings and go to a lecture and you get that over and done with. There's no sense of institution to which I belong to, there's no sense of identity (p. 70).

Jim's words highlight the difference between the drive-thru version of higher education - described by Jim as a group of 'buildings' - and the potential for a higher education system that facilitates, or even acknowledges the role of academic community. Jim, like many other students interviewed in Brenders et al's study, find themselves isolated in an ever-expanding 'megaversity' campus 'full of lonely people held together more by occasional animal ritual than by any sense of richer human community' (Billington, 1991, pp. 40-41). The ritualistic nature of learning interaction in the rationalised university is propounded in Jim's description of his detached, transitory, and procedural attendance to lectures. The anonymity inherent in the megaversity's drive-thru mentality prevents any interconnectedness within the higher education experience. Interconnectedness among persons in the university, based on a sense of communal belonging, is fundamental to shared meaning making which *is* the basis of community, and indeed, the basis of higher education..

Individualism, ideology, competition, and counter-communitarianism

Free market ideology - the ideological basis of economic rationalism - is based on individual competition (Dudley, 1995; Graham, 1998; Meyenn & Parker, 1991; Pusey, 1991; Saul, 1992, 1997). Individual competitiveness is a dominant theme among students interviewed by Brenders et al. The environment created in Billington's megaversity is manifested in the practice of 'inciting hundreds of students to physically compete for a slot in preferred tutorials by charging to the front of the room to put down their names [on sheets of paper]' (Brenders et al, 1996, p. 48). The experience is described by Daniel, a first-year business student:

'In a lecture for our tutorial times they just put five sheets of paper on the desk. And there were 500 people in the classroom. And they said, "Come up and sign your name". It just turned into a big cat fight and everyone was trying to write on pieces of paper. And some people just missed out. They have to go on different days which is inconvenient. In other subjects you put three preferences. But in this one, they made you fight for it' (p. 48).

Deborah, a first-year Social Science student, describes the emotionally destructive effects of her tutorial placement experience:

'They actually just stick up the hours on a board and it is an absolute bun fight to get in and get your name down for a tutorial that suits you, especially when you're part-time student because you're so limited -so I had to literally run over people. And there was one poor mother there who had her child with her -you can imagine there must have been 120 people in a room this size [10x10 meters] trying to get to these boards -and her baby was just absolutely screaming because it was so frantic in there' (p. 49).

The damaging effects of the rampant individualism described by these students is obvious. Less obvious, although equally damaging, is the underpinning constructs that the elements of the students' discourse reveal. The "they" used by these two students to refer to academic staff is used consistently by students from all disciplines throughout the QUT interviewed in the student focus study. The relationship between student and staff is discursively constructed as a dualism; a binary opposition between an "us" and a "them" which provides students with the semantic distance necessary to disregard their embeddedness in the learning relationship in order to make their 'purchase'.

Deborah identifies the social insensitivity inherent in such prolific individualism when she reflects on the mother and baby's distress in the tutorial placement experience. The depiction of the screaming baby amidst student's 'frantic' 'fight' for tutorial placements is graphic in identifying the ultimate dogma of competitiveness incited among students in the rationalised university. Daniel and Deborah both describe the experience as a competitively induced 'fight' to which exclusion or harm to other students is irrelevant. Daniel describes a helpless resignation to the current state of the university in which exclusion is legitimised and necessary when he says 'some people just missed out'. Such experiences disable students' sense of social sensitivity and responsibility by perpetuating resignation to the everyday lived experiences that are characteristic of the "rationalised" university. Even when acknowledging the predominance of 'the market' in the university, students embedded in the economic rationalist ideology cannot transcend its discourse. As Andrew a Justice Studies student describes:

'QUT recognises that it is producing a product for the market place, and to compete, it needs to have the best product' (p. 29).

The level of abstraction in this description is far removed from this more critically discerning comment by Gary, a final year Human Resource Management student:

'On the face of it, they'll spend three million dollars advertising in one week to get students, but they won't buy a book for the library' (p. 62).

The totalising nature of the discourse is predominant in both of these descriptions. Gary in particular, identifies the extent to which the discourse erodes the traditional purpose of the university and subverts its academic values in favour of a hollow predilection to market competitiveness.

If students' perceptions of the real world can stretch no further than a view of the world as a value-free, abstract market, as exemplified in Andrew's discourse, social issues are rendered largely invisible to them. Also, if universities continue to define themselves solely by their links with the same abstract market, they risk abandoning any sense of social responsibility in favour of "producing" highly specialised, semi-skilled professionals competing for jobs, salaries, and socialisation into further corporate anonymity (Korb, Kopp, & Allison, 1997; Lowe, 1994).

Alternatives to a drive thru education: Academic community and social responsibility

Communication within the school of communication

The social fractures that have occurred within the modern megaversity as a result of the totalising discourse of economic rationalism affects academic staff as well as students. The role of academic staff within the system is discursively sandwiched between a rationalised administrative, managerialist discourse and by a marketised, student-as-client discourse. Kerr et al's (1997) study within the School of Communication at the QUT reveals the effects this has upon the academic staff's perceptions about the changing nature of their role in the megaversity: The research revealed that '80 percent of [academic] staff see a need to communicate their *other* roles [besides teaching] to students' (p. 11). The administrative discourse conflates the economically "rational" value of productivity with the traditional academic roles of research, academic leadership, community service, and pedagogy. The conflation of these themes places increasing levels of pressure on academics to take a 'service' orientation towards the student-as-client and also be 'productive' by fostering consultancy relationships with industry (pp. 10-11). The academic staff member's view of the student-as-client paradigm is exemplified in one lecturer's comments: "'Student as client" is dangerous, in that it defines students as a product, a commodity. There is no rationale for the term' (p. 12). Of the 80 percent of academic staff who emphasised the need to communicate their roles requirements to students, many 'acknowledged that having a *support network* of peers was important, and constitutes the foundation of academic community' (p. 11).

The fundamentals of academic community: A discursive framework

Following Lemke (1995), we argue that the various academic disciplines which form the totality of academia can be described as discourse communities insofar as they share thematic patterns; distinct ways of seeing and describing their world (p. 41). Lemke views these communities as being defined by their 'discursive traditions'. In terms of a discursively shaped social practice, Lemke's view coincides with Isaacs concept of a social practice in which 'shared beliefs, actions, and commitments' are reproduced within the social practice (Isaacs, 1998, p.6). Therefore, we may say that academic disciplines are thematically and discursively organised communities of persons with discursively shaped ways of seeing, acting, and responding to contexts and situations (Cf. Isaacs, 1997; Lemke, 1995). Herein, we argue, lies the basis for creating, promoting, and maintaining academic community, thereby providing a way to repair the violence done to the integral social aspects of higher education by economic rationalism.

Human communities are a unique phenomenon in that the role of the individual within a given community is based in linguistic descriptions of what it means to be an individual in that system (Luhmann, 1995, pp. 139-174). Furthermore, Luhmann argues, quite logically, that the basic unit of the human community is communication (1995, p. 81, p. 145). Communication is the means by which a socially embedded discourse community maintains its identity; the means by which its individual constituents understand "the world" and themselves through descriptive discourse; and the means by which convergent and divergent relationships between the community and its constituent individuals are produced, maintained, and altered through the use of language.

The importance of language within higher education is, therefore fundamental to the self-perceptions of the persons who constitute the practice. The professionalism propounded by market ideology - a socially excluding professionalism - stands in contrast to the perceived role of the academic professional. As Reynolds (1991) notes:

'Academic professionals are dignified by the fact that, if truly professional, they provide an essential service to society; a service requiring skills not easily acquired, indeed, secured only over a considerable period of time and at considerable expense; a basic service with a

set of skills having a serious body of scholarship and research, knowing, and information behind them. And all of this – the service and the skills, the facts and their applications – are to be used carefully, for the betterment of society’ (p. 121).

As Reynold’s definition implies, the linguistic slippage between managerial professionalism and academic professionalism is facilitated by the discursive totalisation of economic rationalism. This being the case, as a social practice, each academic community has its own social responsibilities: Each has a social responsibility to the socialisation of its students, a responsibility to the maintenance of its social integrity, and a responsibility to the totality of its social relationships with the wider community. Therefore, we argue that the maintenance of academic community among students and academic staff is fundamental to the maintenance, indeed the survival, of higher education itself. The challenges inherent in mending the discursive rift between students, academics, and administration which is apparent in the studies we cite are manifold. The greatest challenge to the formation of academic community is the sheer size of the megaversity, particularly when diminished staff levels are considered. However, the findings of Kerr et al’s study, we believe, may suggest the instruments of change required to advance academic community within higher education.

Conclusions: Building academic community in the “rationalised” university

Electronically mediated communities: Support network infrastructure for the megaversity

The modern realities of the financial, geographical, and temporal restrictions are exacerbated by the size of the megaversity. Hearn, Mandeville, and Anthony (1998) note that ‘meaningful communication can occur in many modes’ (p. 63). In the case where people ‘cannot afford to rely on face-to-face communication’, as is often the case in the megaversity, Hearn et al suggest that new media may provide a reliable forum for more meaningful communication and offers ‘the possibility of an enhanced sense of community’ (1998, pp. 62-63). Kerr et al (1997) found that ‘[academic] staff regard email as one of the most convenient methods of communication’ (p. 17). However, at least within the QUT, almost half its students do not use their email. The opportunity for an electronically mediated support network - described as the basis of academic community - exists with the proliferation of communication networks. However, as Hearn et al point out, ‘[a]ccess to on-line services is obviously a very basic issue for participation in (or avoidance of) these new forms of community’ (p. 63).

Further recommendations for providing the communication infrastructure and skills which form the basis of an electronic community support network include:

- Encouraging academic staff and students to use email and internet technologies as an adjunct to face-to-face contact.
- “User-friendly” internet and e-mail services with sufficient technical and discipline specific support to enable full access within the university.
- Subject-specific web sites that encourage academic staff and students to develop familiarity and confidence in the use of new technologies.
- Developing information pathways which assist students in navigating the megaversity’s information maze: Information about all areas of the university should be accessible from all areas of the electronic communication infrastructure.

Undergraduate access to academic research activities

By facilitating access to research activities, students may gain an alternate view of the university as merely a service provider to an education “market”. Further, by being involved in research seminars, discussion groups, and as active participants in research, students will, we believe, have the opportunity to see the role of their discipline in its wider social context, thus providing them with the foundations on which to develop social responsibility in the context of their discipline.

Clarifying the values of the disciplines and their role in the advancement of society

In introducing students to their chosen disciplines - their future professional discourse communities - the university has an opportunity to promote the social role of the discipline rather than promoting an ultimately narrow, instrumentally defined, economically exclusive role. By promoting a degree qualification as a “product” or “service”, the university perpetuates the discourse of economic rationalism thereby endangering the survival of higher education itself.

Promoting critical awareness of higher education’s role in the wider community

Critical awareness requires critical *language* awareness. As we have shown, the way in which students describe themselves and their world iteratively affects and reflects the way they see it. If universities are to continue their traditional role as teachers of thought, then they must provide students with the tools of critical language.

The current dualism in the learning environment - reinforced by the student-as-client view - impedes the development of academic community. It discursively isolates academic staff into the dissociated “they”, thereby socially separating the student from the learning relationship. This, then, disables academics in their roles as sharers of knowledge by instrumentalising the learning relationship. Furthermore, in such an environment, students aspire - not to the achievement of learning and acquiring critical thinking skills - but to qualify for entry into an employment “market”. This being the case, neither the student, the academic staff, nor the disfigured education they participate in is accountable to society.

Aronowitz (1989, in Warehime, 1993, p. 63) argues that if the traditional academic community is to ‘regain any significance in the lives of students’ (Warehime, 1993, p. 63), it will have to ‘justify itself’ either by its ‘claims to pertinence’ or by tracing the sociological and historical nature of the community *against* which economic rationalist discourse currently contends (Aronowitz, 1989, in Warehime, 1993, p. 63, emphasis added). In recognising the socio-historically constructed nature of their practice, neophyte members are exposed to ways of seeing and acting opposed to the way of seeing and acting imposed by the “rationalised” higher education system. Critical awareness of the traditional values of higher education may also reinstate the intrinsic and social values of higher education for both students and staff by positioning higher education as a socially embedded, socially responsive practice, rather than as a market-driven industry comprised solely of “value-free” producers and consumers.

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