POWER POSTURES AND LANDING PAGES, THE LONG-TAIL OF NEOLIBERALISM
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When academics speak of 'learning spaces' and 'learning platforms', what kind of spaces are they evoking? When they use the term 'personalisation', who and what kind of people are they implicating in the personal? If we stop to consider these questions, it soon becomes apparent that personal learning platforms are inescapably ideological spaces, in which the student (often now framed as 'the learner'), is tacitly modelled. But, since their pervasive introduction in the mid-2000s, online learning platforms have evolved into mechanisms not only for teaching, but increasingly as stages for the management of the academic self.
I have worked with and against such learning platforms, predominately, Moodle, for about twelve years; as a student, a technology enhanced learning coordinator, lecturer and head of programme. The staff-facing materials contained on such platforms are, like student-facing pages, a site of acute ideological tension, deeply implicated with the pervasive business ontology of higher education and the overt anxieties of our era, forming a constellation of the personal constructed from trajectories of both anxiety and self-improvement.

Staff-facing materials which invoke *personalisation* are in many ways the opposite of what they claim to be, representing instead, an abject lack of personality and, an eviscerated blankness. For students, the model of the personal projected upon them, is close to what the artist, Katherine Behar, frames as **'personalities without people'**, in which subjectivity becomes an object, separate from specific individuality. Academic platform personalisation, as mediated through a business teleology (the view that all actions should lead to profit) is closer to Cambridge Analytica's model of personality, one of probabilistic abstractions such as *openness* and *introversion*. These are manifestations of avidly data-mined subjectivity which refuse the cohesive subject-oriented-identity politics of, gender, race and class, reverting instead, to an intractable long-tail of mathematical permutation.

As **Behar writes**:

> the exhausting rise of networked data practices contributes to these vehement reassertions of an overbearingly autonomous (hence disconnected) self. Constant data transactions subtly reshape our self-conception as probabilistically computed, contingent, always available, and at-risk. In exchange for tantalizing personalization, personhood is reduced to fragile data constellations requiring continuous maintenance to cohere.

Within a specifically educational context, **Williamson highlights** the education company Pearson's, potential role as 'a methodological gatekeeper', able to profit from enormous amounts of data harvested from learning platforms. We might also contemplate the parlous nature of student and staff data rights when it comes to online learning platforms, in an environment in which he notes:

> Beyond its business plans, Pearson is participating in a reconfiguration of the methods by which learning is conceptualized, measured and understood, and seeking

to secure consensus for its views through mobilizing techniques of data visualization and human–computer interaction.

Foremost among the learning platforms I have worked with is Moodle, or *the modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment*, developed in 1999 by **Martin Dougiamas**, for whom it was part of his doctoral practice at Curtin University, Australia. Moodle was an overtly Social Constructionist project, indeed Dougiamas's thesis was entitled 'The use of Open Source software to support a social constructionist epistemology of teaching and learning within Internet-based communities of reflective inquiry'.

Unsurprisingly, my own Moodle landing pages, like those of so many other academics and students, have never reflected Dougiamas's original intentions. Instead, the Moodle landing pages for a wide range of universities I have both studied and worked at, represent the paradox and tension of the personalised learning platform. Such pages have become a locus of control, in which disciplinarian, *immunological* metaphors of otherness (dependent on the idea of threatening external forces) and, on the other hand, a psychopolitical attachment to the positive, vie for dominance over the academic self. Psychopolitics frames our inner drives and fears as that which motivates us, whereas immunological, disciplinarian models, require a sense of threat from outside forces (or a failed immune system) to exert control.

The data analytics enabled by learning platforms as presented to their users, might arguably reduce personalisation to surface features, arising from *a priori* algorithmic structures, such as font sizes and colours. At best these systems might provide data-visualisations tracking the progression of ready-made content, expunged of actionable insight into specific individuals. But there is a deeper meaning to personalisation, one that plugs straight into an economy of emotional capital, commodifying the individual psyche, in which emotions '**provide "raw material" with which to optimize corporate communication**'.

When looking back at the myriad personalised Moodle landing pages I have encountered, it is hard to think of a more overt presentation of what Byung-Chul Han terms *psychopolitics*, nor a clearer illustration of what such psychopolitics represent, a shift from the disciplinary to the neoliberal, to positivity and self-improvement. On a **typical academic landing page** there are links to resources for Mental Resilience and Student Support, but there are also staff-facing self-improvement packages addressing Information Security and The Prevent Duty in Higher Education, which aims 'to tackle ideologies and grievances that can fuel violent extremist behaviour'. Side-by-side with an unwavering commitment to the power of positive thinking, there is the presence of a *Dangerous Other*, one from whom we must all be protected:- the terrorist in our midst, hiding in the cohorts and corridors of academe.

In this way institutional Moodle sites mirror the tensions between a regime of discipline and a regime which appeals to the neoliberal psyche, between Foucault's 'disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories', and one which has largely, '**been replaced by…..'a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls**'. Moodle landing pages point clearly to the many ways in which (at least within a neo-liberal

context) we are '**no longer a disciplinary society…. but rather an achievement society**' in which 'inhabitants are no longer "obedience-subjects" but "achievement-subjects."'.

But what of those who fall foul of achievement society, through autonomic rebellion, such as depression, or some other somaticized failure to remain positive, let alone an act of conscious terror? In 2008 **The Health and Safety Executive calculated that**:

> *13.8 million working days annually are lost to work-related stress, anxiety and depression, and the University and College Union's 2008 survey found academics reporting 'very high stress levels, considerably higher than average', which had increased from earlier surveys in 1998 and 2004.*

Despite the profound impact upon our lives, these stress levels are rarely spoken of within the Academy, and, if they are, they tend to be treated as individual, personal experiences, rather than structural features of the contemporary university. Luckily, it seems our Moodle landing pages have a solution for all possible transgressions – for both terrorism and depression – in many universities links are provided for once-a-term head massages, yoga and mindfulness sessions, confirming Han's assertion that we have shifted from a disciplinary to an Achievement Society, in a process of 'discarding negativity' in which **'Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb'**.

Even for poor occupational performance, my personalised management package helps me to correct it in a positive way, recommending *Power Postures* to boost confidence and efficiency. Additionally, I can study all these modules at my own pace, because what is truly personalised about this learning is that I can do it at home or on the bus or in the middle of the night. I can improve myself 24/7. As **Jonathan Crary puts it**, we can enjoy a temporality in which:

> *an unimpeded substitutability between time becomes normalized. Conventional and older durational units persist (like "nine to five" or "Monday to Friday"),but overlaid onto them are all the practices of individual time management made possible by 24/7 networks and markets.*

The personalisation we are dealing with here is arguably not driven by pedagogic imperatives, but **an appeal to self-exploitation, within a context where everyone should at least 'feel free'**, where we lay ourselves bare voluntarily, in which 'freedom and insecurity now form the new couple in neoliberal governmentality'. UK Higher Education policy, like that of so many other neo-liberal states, models an individualised construct of 'social mobility', in which the focus is **'the capacity for individuals to move up (or down) socio-economic hierarchies, focusing on individual capacities rather than addressing wider societal issues'**. This has gone hand-in-hand with the growth of the academic precariat and an ideology of self-improvement. In such a context, the increasing emphasis on 'personalised learning', or rather the instrumental fragmentation of a cohesive political response, is exemplified by the *reductio ad absurdum* of the power posture.

Isabell Lorey entreats us to 'resist the lure of being threatened,' to 'take a critical distance from these forms of fearfulness that make us vulnerable to exploitation', to not seek

security at all costs, to oppose a politics of 'pure victimization'. Lorey suggests that 'the precariat have the potential to refuse to allow themselves to be divided and dispersed for the protection of some against threatening others'. One aspect of such a political shift is to resist the isolation embedded in personalisation rhetoric and practice.

Faced with a pervasive business ontology, one which cannot conceive of education beyond the imperative of profit, for which the learning platform has been contorted from its original intention, it is imperative that we understand the porous boundaries between self-improvement and self-exploitation. Self-improvement and self-exploitation both operate from liminal, psychologically manipulative layers of learning platforms. On these platforms the long-tails of machine learnt subjectivity are never neutral, indeed, the subjectivity they construct is always and increasingly instrumental. In the age of platform learning we should urgently acknowledge: *personalisation is political*.

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Image: Bonnie Stewart