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Economic Subjectivities in Higher Education

Self, Policy and Practice in the Knowledge Economy

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—INTRODUCTION

In the macro-narratives of educational and economic discourse, higher education is ‘big business’—a key sector in the global knowledge economy, and a major export industry in the national economies of Anglophone countries.¹ As universities engage in competition for students, resources and rankings, the everyday activities and subjectivities of tertiary learners and educators are discursively reconfigured according to market models. Students are clients, educators are service providers, and ‘quality’ teaching, learning objectives and student attributes and outcomes are the new language of pedagogy. But in the micro-narratives of everyday teaching and learning, higher education is refracted through multiple lenses of experience and encounter. As Gert Biesta points out, ‘the role of the University is not exhausted by its economic function’ and that ‘although neo-liberal policies increasingly present a University education as an investment in one’s future employability, we also should not forget those who engage in Higher Education first and foremost for personal fulfilment and for the intrinsic rather than the exchange value of a University

degree'.² Thus the desired/desirable economic subject of higher education discourse—the market-savvy chooser who drives competition through consumer demand for product quality and customer satisfaction, who recognises the worth of his or her own human capital and the (brand) value of degrees within business and industry, and who takes up the technopreneurial challenges and opportunities supposedly on offer—seems to bear only traces of resemblance to the embodied subjects of everyday life and learning who inhabit the classrooms and corridors of academe.

In this article, I consider the discursive constitution of the university as a site for the production of economic subjectivities. Drawing insights from Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Nikolas Rose, I argue that pedagogic encounter—and the subjective and collective possibilities represented therein—is increasingly disciplined through its reconfiguration in terms of economic exchange.³ I explore the implications for those whose learning and labour are shaped in and through the experience of universities, contending that economic discourse displaces, disciplines and disrupts (perhaps even productively) educational discourse. Finally, I engage ideas from feminist economic studies to call for a decentering of market metaphors in educational discourse and to suggest the need for a new language of encounter in the ongoing dialogues between economy and education.⁴

—I, WE, THEY: SITUATING THE ECONOMIC SUBJECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the past decade, concerns about the 'enterprise university' have provoked a number of scholars to consider how the convergence of education with commercialism might impact on both student learning *and* academic work.⁵ Much of this scholarship has focused on the ways that students increasingly see education as a product that can be purchased and used as they, its consumers, see fit, and on the implications of consumer orientations for student learning, engagement and ethical conduct.⁶ The emphasis that policy makers and universities alike place on higher education as a knowledge industry that in turn serves the demands of business, industry and the global knowledge economy, has promoted views of university study that are increasingly outcomes-driven rather than learning-oriented.⁷ As David Chan and William Lo observe from the Hong Kong context, corporate culture within universities is seen by many as 'an erosion of the conduct of higher education

[that] would send an incorrect message to students. For instance, the consumerist culture on campus makes them unable to distinguish the role of citizen from consumer.⁸ Scholars have become increasingly concerned about the impacts of managerialism and regulatory audit cultures in the neoliberal university on the everyday working lives of academic subjects.⁹

While I am generally sympathetic to such critiques, and have contributed to this debate through my own work, in this article I want to engage in the conversation from a somewhat different vantage point. Specifically, concerns about the conflation of economic and educational discourse are taken here as a starting point for considering the disciplinary and the disadvantageous, *as well as* the potentially productive, aspects of their operation in the spaces of university learning and teaching. In staging such a move, my aim is to momentarily step to one side of the binary logic that structures economy and culture in strictly oppositional terms, 'in which culture and economy are seen as macro structures operating on each other as externalities' in order to engage with questions of economic subjectivity in higher education.¹⁰ In such undertakings, it is important to begin 'by recognizing our own places with/in and against the new mode of public, private, personal and political regulation'¹¹—thus I want to offer a brief account of my own 'becoming' as a subject of the co-implicated domains of academic and economic life, acknowledging my own complicity in the discourses that I (and others) so readily critique.

Just over two decades ago, I found myself confronted by a number of personal and financial dilemmas that provoked me to enrol in an undergraduate degree program. I was raising four small children, financially dependent on a spouse's unpredictable income, with no 'marketable' skills, qualifications or career prospects of my own, and feeling in desperate need of intellectual stimulation. Things needed to change, and I saw a university education as an important means by which to alter my life circumstances. My situation resonated then, and continues to resonate, with Michel de Certeau's observation that 'Every individual experience functions within a system of economic structures ... Experience cannot be isolated from the socio-economic whole in which it intervenes.'¹² My interest in formal learning (which seems easy to admit) was accompanied by a (less easily admissible) desire to establish myself as an income earner and to pursue a professional career. There would be numerous instances of 'becoming' for me during the course of my

university study—and while I maintained a ‘passionate attachment’ to the personal and social benefits of formal learning, for me there was and remains an undeniable attraction in the pursuit of career and the relative social status and financial benefits it provides.¹³ While my multiple positionings as an academic and economic subject are in turn subject to tensions associated with being, in particular, a woman and mother, they are hardly unique.¹⁴

I acknowledge, too, the numerous disciplinary technologies at play here—the self-fashioning that has taken place in pedagogic encounters during my years as an undergraduate and later a postgraduate student, and that has continued on in the subsequent years of establishing an academic career; the techno-bureaucratic regimes that increasingly regulate research and pedagogy in the university sector; and the relational encounters with others who are also negotiating subjectivities in the context of tertiary study and work. Thus it is important to situate this discussion as a site in which the academic ‘I’ who writes is not neatly separable from others with whom I have studied, learned, taught, read and written about in the contexts of higher education. I, we, they—myself, students, colleagues, collaborators, mentors, employers—share multiple (if at times contradictory and problematic) subject positions shaped by our personal, financial and cultural investments in higher education. I acknowledge from the outset my own complicity in the co-implication of education and economy, realising that I am both product and beneficiary of the conflation of educational and economic discourses about which I offer the following critique and reflection.

I understand educational and economic discourses and the promises they both offer and withhold, as situated at the complex intersection of technologies of domination with techniques of self through which the individual is constituted as ‘economic subject’.¹⁵ Desire, aspiration, education, work and so on are understood in relation to what Foucault refers to as the ‘subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies’, such that governmentality is accomplished, at least in part, through the subjective work of the self-fashioning individual.¹⁶ In this sense, educational and economic participation are among those technologies through which work on the self establishes and maintains intelligibility and viability.¹⁷ Critiques of higher education reforms have tended to focus on the deleterious and the debilitating effects of neoliberal rationalities and managerialist

practices. This article is intended to be read in dialogue with, rather than in opposition to, that literature. My aim is to consider the production of economic subjectivities in its agentic as well as its problematic aspects. As Foucault contends:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.¹⁸

Foucault offers here a crucial insight for considerations of agency and complicity in the knowledge economy, and for working toward more nuanced accounts of economic subjectivity as dangerous rather than as bad, undesirable or wrong. Importantly, this is not to advocate for neoliberal agendas in higher education policy and practice. Rather, it is to suggest that counter-narratives of educational and economic participation—that involve critically reflexive accounts of our own positionalities, complicities and ethico-political choices—are crucial if the discursive terrain in which neoliberal rationalities have come to be normalised is to be effectively remade.

In the following sections, I explore some of the ways that higher education is currently implicated in the production of economic subjectivities, with a view to querying normative policy and pedagogic practices that simultaneously embrace, refuse and reinscribe disciplinary technologies associated with economic participation. Drawing on the work of poststructuralist theorists, as well as scholars working in the field of economic politics, I ask how higher education might be re-envisioned and *undisciplined* by exploring the pedagogic possibilities of three proposed requirements of economic politics put forward by Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson. These are:

the need for a new language of economy to widen the field of economic possibility, the self-cultivation of subjects (including ourselves) who can desire and enact other economies, and the collaborative pursuit of economic experimentation.¹⁹

Gibson and Graham's work is concerned explicitly with constructing new narratives of community economies and, in so doing, performatively constituting new forms of individual and intersubjective economic engagement. Drawing on examples from

Australian higher education policy, my commencement of university studies and observations from my first decade as a tertiary educator and researcher working in pre-service teacher education, I engage with Gibson and Graham's line of thinking by considering its implications for educational and pedagogic dilemmas situated at the nexus of intellectual and economic activity.

The need for a new language of economy to widen the field of economic possibility

The first of Gibson and Graham's propositions for a reconfigured economic politics pertains to the performative function of language. They are concerned with the ways that economic language limits and constrains through the metaphors it invokes, the narratives it forecloses and reiterates, the relations it establishes and the politics it conceals, maintains and privileges. Taken into the discursive terrain of higher education, we need only look to recent higher education policy documents to get a glimpse of the language used by Australian governments to characterise the work of universities. According to the Australian Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Kim Carr, 'Universities and public research organisations provide knowledge to fuel the innovation system and skilled people to drive it.'²⁰ Carr's ministerial portfolio has responsibility for, among other things, the national research agenda. According to the 2009 report, *Powering Ideas: An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century*:

We depend so much on universities, in fact, that if their performance slips, the whole innovation system suffers. It is therefore essential that we keep them working well—not just by some standard we set ourselves, but as measured against the world's best. An internationally competitive economy begins with an internationally competitive innovation system—and that begins with internationally competitive universities. Australia has very good universities that do a great deal of fine research, but in today's cut-throat world, that is not enough. Our universities must be able to demonstrate genuine and consistent excellence in everything they do—whether it is teaching, research, engaging with the community, or collaborating with industry. We are not quite at that level yet, and reform is needed to get us there.²¹

At the policy level, as articulated in the excerpts from Carr's report above, the macro-narrative of education for the purpose of and in service to the national economy is unambiguous. The language invoked constructs knowledge and those involved in its production as a useful and necessary, albeit meaningless, resource—as fuel for feeding the growth of the economic machinery and the implied captains of industry needed to drive it. The rationale for universities and their contribution to knowledge is cast in terms of excellence, measurement and competition—a means of national protection against a ruthless and cut-throat world that lurks just beyond imaginary borders where the Other awaits, ready to plunder and despoil national fantasies of a perennially prosperous white, middle-class, 'lucky country'. As for teaching and learning, the reform agenda for higher education following the 2008 Bradley review in Australia will be (not surprisingly), subject to 'an increased focus on quality' that will require institutions 'to demonstrate that their graduates have the capabilities that are required for successful engagement in today's complex world'.²² According to the Australian Federal Government's 2009 *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* report, which announced a raft of tertiary sector reforms, including new quality measures:

The new quality assurance arrangements will ensure that domestic and international students have better information about how our higher education institutions are performing and that taxpayers can see whether value for money is being delivered and the national interest is being well served. Our higher education institutions are experienced in measuring their research performance. They will become equally good at demonstrating students' academic performance and documenting what students learn, know and can do.²³

While the instrumentalist nature of quality audits such as those outlined above appear to have little to do with the pedagogic encounters that characterise so much of university participation, the everyday learning and teaching that take place in university classrooms are nonetheless being configured and reinscribed within the language of demonstration, documentation, measurement and audit. Pedagogy is at once effaced and disciplined through the constitution of those who learn and teach as economic subjects, whose primary purpose is to measure and be measured, and whose primary responsibility lies in their answerability not to themselves, to their

students, peers, lecturers or colleagues, nor to their families and communities, but rather to the public purse.

It perhaps goes without saying that the economically derived language of national policy sets the stage for the operational language of tertiary institutions, articulating the imperatives by which they will be judged and the mechanisms by which they will be measured. In these terms, and under these conditions, educational participants are no longer positioned primarily as students, learners, educators, or scholars. They are constituted instead as entrepreneurial consumers and producers, for whom economically inflected notions of choice, desire, entitlement, satisfaction, achievement, competition and enterprise operate as powerful technologies for shaping individual identities and social relations. Incorporated into globalising agendas and a neoliberal ethos, education becomes a vehicle through which 'to expand and make ambiguous the borders of the nation'.²⁴ Thus higher learning, according to Aiwa Ong, 'has been accompanied by a higher yearning to become leading institutions in global space', both subject to and productive of the techno-bureaucratic accountabilities through which the achievement of these aims have come to be measured.²⁵ At the levels of nation, institution and individual, the pedagogic encounters of educational participation are disciplined through their metaphoric tethering to economic participation.

Returning to Gibson and Graham's call for a new language of economy, we are reminded of the apparent impasse between the uni-dimensional, dehumanised economic subject of higher education policy rhetoric and the complex embodied subject of pedagogic encounter. As others have argued, 'The intensification of the economic function of knowledge has come at the expense of the social function of knowledge', such that 'Modern economics is distinguished by its differentiation from wider society and its tendency to abstract itself from the specificities of time and place, obligation and power, and political, social, and cultural institutions.'²⁶ Under such conditions, the driving interest of economic discourse—the perceived, symbolic and material gains potentially accrued by individuals, institutions and national economies concerned with knowledge production—has been accompanied by an inverse retreat from those forms of social exchange that privilege the intersubjective over the accumulative. Yet there is surely much to recommend collective reflection on whether and in what ways the co-implication of economy

and education might be spoken, produced and reconfigured in other, richer and more nuanced ways. After all, as Gibson and Graham argue, 'our economy is what we (discursively and practically) make it'.²⁷

For just as pedagogic encounter is disciplined through audit culture's 'technologies of control', it can surely be *undisciplined* through practices of reflection, critique, dissent, reciprocity and creative engagement.²⁸ As Eva Bendix Petersen points out, 'resistance to neoliberal rationalities and practices must consist of deliberate promotion and nurturing of counter-neoliberal rationalities and practices, in order to prevent neoliberal discourses from coagulating and becoming hegemonic'.²⁹ A new language of economy, where pedagogy is concerned, might attend more sensitively to the economic needs, desires and imaginings that, for many, influence decisions to enter tertiary study or academic work. Pedagogies that actively engage students in dialogue about their own understandings of the connections between self, learning, and economic participation are needed, as are pedagogies that invite students to critique the ways they are constituted within policy rhetorics, institutional branding and education promotions as consumers of education, rather than as participants in learning.³⁰ This involves developing pedagogies that invite students to understand how the instrumentalist and individualising rationalities of neoliberalism have become naturalised and normalised, and that encourage students to develop their own counter-narratives of resistance and revisioning. It also involves cultivating academic literacies through which scholarly learning 'is valued for its potential to challenge, sustain, and think anew', rather than as a transactional exchange in which fees are traded for qualifications, or intellectual labour is traded for outcomes and skills.³¹ In particular, I would argue, it is increasingly crucial that material practices such as assessment and scholarly writing engage students more directly in developing an understanding of how such practices function 'to shape their subjectivities as learners and thinkers, rather than as subjects of institutional regimes of measurement and accountability'.³²

Importantly, I am not suggesting that the academy resist or deny its role in preparing students for certain forms of economic participation. Rather I am arguing tertiary students should be offered the means by which to recognise and critique the discursive effects of education conceived primarily in economic terms, and to re-imagine its possibilities when disentangled from capitalist, individualist and

neoliberal hegemonies. This requires finding new ways to acknowledge fields of possibility that move beyond metaphors that constitute knowledge as the machinery of economic warfare in what feminist scholars have long identified as a 'patriarchal linguistic order', with more respectful appraisals based on social equality, sustainability, and meaningful human engagement.³³ This is not to trivialise or discount the impact of neoliberal discourse in the studying and working lives of students and academics. Rather it is to acknowledge the relationships between gift, risk, libidinal, survival and knowledge economies, and to argue for a counter-language that invites a re-visioning of the individual and collective possibilities that inhere in intersecting domains of economic *and* educational participation.³⁴

The self-cultivation of subjects (including ourselves) who can desire and enact other economies

A second aspect of Gibson and Graham's call for performatively constituting new forms of individual and intersubjective economic engagement pertains to the domain of subjectivity. I take as given that higher education's learning and teaching subjectivities are constituted by and within political, institutional and educational discourses, and thereby reconfigured, regulated and disciplined within the terms of economic subjectivities. For many scholars, neoliberal regimes of governance are strongly implicated in historically located discursive shifts that have displaced the responsibilities of the welfare state onto individuals—who are now required to establish economically viable futures through self-actualisation and self-investment. Michael Peters, for example, argues that:

Above all, the theme of 'responsibilising the self,' a process at once economic and moral, is concomitant with a new tendency to 'invest' in the self at crucial points in the life cycle and symbolises the shift in the regime and governance of education and welfare under neo-liberalism.³⁵

Peters makes a valuable argument, seeing tertiary education, in particular, as 'no longer driven by public investment but, rather, by private investment decisions'.³⁶ His observations, informed by Foucault's notion of governmentality, echo similar observations made by Nikolas Rose in the late 1990s concerning the governance of populations via the 'responsibilisation' of the individual.³⁷ Specifically, Rose's work traces how the modern social subject is produced and governed through the internal logics, laws and processes that together make up the domain of events understood

as 'the economy', and through these, in turn, the everyday lives of individual consumers are mediated. Indeed, Rose goes so far as to suggest that as economic discourse has become woven throughout other domains of social life, 'All aspects of *social* behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines—as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice.'³⁸

Within the higher education literature, this situation has largely been considered in terms of the perceived negative impacts of neoliberal governance on the subjectivities of students and university educators required to 'come to terms' with education as a form of competitive enterprise. Pedagogic encounters are seen by many as being disciplined by economic discourse, as the relational and transformative dimensions of learning and teaching are subsumed by the pervasive demands of prescribed outcomes, standards, accountabilities, and other regulatory and quality assurance mechanisms.³⁹ Once again, I am supportive of these views, and it is not my intention to pose a counter-argument. Rather, my interest is in considering how the disciplining of pedagogy that takes place in the intersection of educational and economic discourse might be productively reconfigured through discursive practices that explicitly seek to *undiscipline* pedagogic encounters, in order to forge new ways of engaging conceptually and practically with education and economy.

To that end, Foucault's series of lectures published collectively under the title *Hermeneutics of the Subject* is instructive in articulating how processes of self are cultivated via pedagogic and relational forms taken up in different schools of philosophical thought from Plato onward.⁴⁰ In this work, Foucault traces the history of subject formation through notions of care of the self, self-knowledge, relationship of self to self, self to other, and self to truth, situating subjectivity as intimately connected to the history of philosophical thought and instruction. Throughout its history and evolving practices, techniques and orientations, the history of the subject forms a 'connection of care of the self with politics, pedagogy and self-knowledge'.⁴¹ The pedagogic purpose of philosophical thought and practice, if you like, is seen as the operation of discourses in the lives of learners, so that they would 'have ready to hand' a means of responding to and withstanding the events of life and lifetimes.⁴²

The discourses learned, embodied and practiced via the pedagogic sites of ancient philosophy were not just memories to recall or techniques to 'apply'; rather they were 'a part of oneself'.⁴³ Pedagogic practice, in this sense, is understood as constitutive of discursive 'truths' of self and other, and techniques of listening, writing and self reflection were seen as linking together 'the truth and the subject'—not essential truths hidden within but, rather, principles of conduct and an ethics of living, and the means by which to judge the value of one's actions throughout a lifetime.⁴⁴

Foucault's analysis of subjectivity formation through one's engagement in ancient philosophical schools of thought offers an alternative vision of education as a site of the self-fashioning social subject. This not to suggest a nostalgic or sentimentalising return to the pre-modern; Foucault insists 'I think there is no exemplary value in a period that is not our period ... it is not anything to get back to'.⁴⁵ What Foucault proposes instead are comparisons that enable present conditions to be better understood as historically and discursively produced, rather than as natural, inevitable or necessary.

Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what's going on now—and to change it.⁴⁶

Understanding the technologies through which subjectivities have been formed in times and places other than our own is helpful for considering what the cultivation of contemporary subjectivities grounded in ethical understandings and practices of educational and economic participation might entail. In this instance, the self-fashioning subject of ancient philosophy concerned with what Foucault refers to as an 'aesthetics of existence' acts as a counterpoint to much of what currently passes as acceptable practice in the outcomes-driven environment of contemporary tertiary learning.⁴⁷

Here I draw on my experience of academic work over the past decade in the field of pre-service teacher education—a field that has witnessed (and in some cases actively orchestrated) the demise or severe diminishing of domains of philosophical and critical inquiry often treated as superfluous to the instrumentalist agendas of

external authorities and accreditation bodies.⁴⁸ It seems that pre-service teacher education students' exposure to philosophical knowledge as a foundation for transformative thought and practice has been drastically reduced. They have been systematically replaced with 'tick-box' approaches to setting criteria, outcomes, attributes and standards to be assessed, measured, and continuously subjected to processes of audit and review. As John Smyth contends with respect to the debilitating effects of present emphases on accountability:

A major problem with the concept of accountability as it is being applied to education is that while it postures as if it were politically neutral and concerned only with benign technical reconciliations of objectives against measured performance outcomes, it is of course nothing of the kind—it is a highly politically charged entity in the sense that it demands certain action be performed, while forcefully foreclosing on others ... In presenting itself as if it has no agenda beyond the technical, the concept of accountability closes down thinking.⁴⁹

What we see as a consequence are students who often fail to see the point in intellectual challenge, and who struggle to see the relevance of inquiring after and interrogating the social norms and inequities in which education has been so persistently implicated.⁵⁰

While much work to address this situation is being done by scholars with personal and political commitments to education as a vehicle for social change, much more is needed at policy, systemic and institutional levels. If we are to cultivate subjectivities able to desire and enact other economies—and in particular, educational economies that offer more to students than 'marketable' skills and qualifications—then pedagogic and relational exchanges in higher education must be *undisciplined*, explicitly untethered from the stranglehold of accountabilities, and renewed with a broader, sustained commitment on the part of policy makers, institutions and individual academics to transformative knowledge. While education is undeniably implicated in the production of 'economic subjectivity', I would argue that the cultivation of economic subjectivities within tertiary learning environments need not be reduced to self-interest, individualism, competition or instrumentalism.⁵¹ Neither should the regulation of subjectivity via neoliberal rationalities be allowed the discursive luxury of dominating over the resistances and

ethico-political choices that can be made irrespective of neoliberalism's present ideological stranglehold on global markets and the institutions that serve them.

For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.⁵²

Here Foucault loosens the conceptual ties—so often invoked in educational and policy discourse—between ethical practices and institutions and systems of governance. He argues instead that 'ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure'.⁵³ This has important implications for the ways academics and tertiary students alike are invited to engage with educational and economic discourse, and to cultivate educated and economic subjectivities.

In particular, cultivating economic subjectivities capable of deconstructing their socially situated practices and orientations, and the implications of these, makes possible other forms of personal, economic and social transformation. For Gibson and Graham, this constitutes the basis of ethical practice:

The co-implicated processes of changing the self/thinking/world is what we identify as an ethical practice. If politics is a process of transformation instituted by taking decisions in an undecideable terrain, ethics is the continual exercising, in the face of the need to decide, of a choice to be/act/think a certain way.⁵⁴

For tertiary educators, enacting a transformative politics in classroom settings can be particularly difficult in climates where student-consumers preoccupied with acquiring instrumentalist skills increasingly demand epistemological and methodological certainties as obligatory learning outcomes.⁵⁵ Transformative classroom politics thus requires pedagogic approaches that actively engage students themselves in the project of repositioning undecideable educational, professional and social terrains as spaces in which ethical subjectivities can be actively negotiated, rather than as limitations or deficits of their tertiary learning.

Importantly, it is imperative that the 'I, we, they' who make up the higher education community more actively interrogate the current learning economies that all too often pivot around mechanistic inputs and outcomes, due dates and deadlines, customer service and consumer feedback. There is instead a critical need to pursue alternatives that place subjectivities and relations between self and self, self and other and self and knowledge at the forefront of our collective concern. This does not imply a denial of the interconnectedness between education and economy, but rather a reconfiguring of the relationship such that the politics of transformation—personal, educational, economic and social—is placed at the core, rather than the periphery, of university learning and teaching.

The collaborative pursuit of economic experimentation

How, then, are those of us who study and work in academe to pursue economic experimentation of a sort that offers transformational alternatives to what is offered in the present climate? Given the macro-narratives in which the economy is 'more often portrayed as a unified entity than as a set of practices scattered over a landscape', it seems more necessary than ever to ask how such narratives might be disrupted, deconstructed and decentred.⁵⁶ Economic experimentation, in this sense, involves displacing the centrality of commercial exchange in its various guises that shape engagement between students, academics and tertiary institutions, and attending instead to those forms of 'noncommodity production and nonmarket exchange' said to 'haunt' both capitalism and knowledge economy policies.⁵⁷ If there is to be a productive reformulation of the intersection between education and economy, then surely the macro-narratives through which economic discourse is installed as monolithic and inevitable will need to be opened up to alternative discourses. In particular, the language and practice of education policy and pedagogic relations will need to be motivated by the imperative to cultivate subjectivities capable of enacting other economies and other ways of being than those available within the hegemonic discourse of capitalist enterprise.

In part, I would suggest that this involves a collective rethinking of education's potential for delivering alternatives to symbolic and material social inequities. In particular, it is crucial that those of us most actively engaged in the critique of economic discourse within educational settings (critiques that are both necessary

and important), pause nonetheless to reflect on our own complicities—individually and institutionally—in creating and maintaining those conditions. As Derrida points out with respect to teaching as representative of systems of reproduction, ‘a concept of reproduction ... cannot be expanded without recognizing the contradiction at work within it’.⁵⁸ While much has been written about the deleterious effects of economic discourse on student engagement, academic morale and the like, critiques have largely centred on the discursive practices of *others*, and seldom acknowledge collective complicities that reproduce, maintain and perpetuate the dominance of economic discourse in the tertiary landscape. Across this literature, university pedagogy is seen as constrained by limitations of academic time and externally imposed imperatives that emphasise instrumentalist and techno-bureaucratic requirements, while personal wellbeing, collegiality and collaboration are seen as compromised by neoliberal agendas driving educational policy and practice.

What is less seldom acknowledged, however, are the privileges and pleasures that accompany our individual and collective participation in the very discourses we critique. As discussed with reference to my entry into higher education, I am compelled to acknowledge that my misgivings about the subjugation of education to economic discourse are accompanied nonetheless by my own economically inflected motivations, pleasures and desires. To put it bluntly, my professional life provides me with a stable income, enables me to maintain an enjoyable lifestyle, opportunities to travel, personal autonomy and a degree of financial security, calling to mind Don Slater’s observation that ‘economic and cultural categories are merged within the structures of market relations and micro-economic action’.⁵⁹ Moreover, I actively pursue career opportunities that further enhance my earning capacity and professional status, and there are numerous ways in which these activities are reliant upon and productive of the entrenchment of neoliberal practices in higher education that I in turn actively critique. Even while acknowledging that the economic order in its neoliberal configurations displaces, disciplines and disrupts educational discourse, it is important to recognise that there are potentially productive dimensions to its operation, the benefits of which accrue to many in academic circles.

What is less often acknowledged are the ways in which entry into and progression within the academy is both made possible and enhanced through the

very practices that are, in turn, widely critiqued as deleterious to ethical social and pedagogical relations.⁶⁰ Perhaps nowhere is this seen so profoundly as in the domain of postgraduate, and in particular, doctoral research training, which ‘is changing and intensifying internationally in relation to pressures to tie the outcomes of doctoral research to the assessment of research quality and productivity’.⁶¹ Postgraduate training has thus become ever more narrowly circumscribed within institutional demands for efficiency, expediency and productivity, characterised by ‘greater accountability and tighter time frames for completion ... and an ever-tighter folding in of research training into research assessment exercises’.⁶² In the Australian context, for example, higher degree programs increasingly incorporate formally structured workshops, seminars, and mentoring aimed at inducting postgraduate students into those aspects of academic work—such as scholarly publishing and grant writing—most likely to contribute to both their own strategic advantage in the university labour market, as well as to the overall research outputs of institutions and departments. What is less often addressed in such programs is the need for preparing students to take up ethically responsive positions in competitive and outcomes-driven institutions and sectors.

Treated as a potential economic resource, whether in the form of producing research publications and grant income, or in the form of labour outsourcing in a casualised tertiary sector, there seem to be limited opportunities for postgraduate students to experiment in meaningful ways with the symbolic, relational and material benefits enjoyed by many whose place in the academy is already secured.⁶³ Addressing such issues requires not only systemic changes, but also individual and collaborative endeavours on the part of academics through which more equal dialogues and shared opportunities with students are made possible. In part, this means rethinking and refusing exploitative practices that pilfer time, expertise and creativity from the next generation of scholars. But it also means inviting them into ongoing conversations about a) how ethical practices and cultures might be cultivated within climates of competitive individualism through which academic and economic achievement are so regularly accomplished, and b) how critically reflexive responses to such climates can be formulated in light of our own positionalities. Expanding our conceptualisation of the interplay between education and economy, and experimenting with new ways of being and doing in order to transform the

present order, surely requires greater collective recognition of our complicity in its reproduction, and greater transparency on such matters with those who constitute the academy of the future.

In part, too, discursive experimentation involves collectively re-imagining the work of the university, and experimenting with new forms of pedagogy that contest and cast to one side the bottom-line of university audit cultures and artifices such as graduate attributes, satisfaction surveys, standards and benchmarking. Specifically, I am suggesting that pedagogy stand its ground in two key ways. Firstly, that pedagogy (and I am thinking here most particularly of those disciplines where instrumentalism and slavish adherence to industry and professional standards have become deeply entrenched within discipline-specific pedagogic norms) renew and intensify its call for modes of philosophical inquiry and meaning-making as constituting its primary function. Speaking from the position of a pre-service teacher educator, such a stance involves active resistance both to the accountability culture to which John Smyth so eloquently speaks, as well as to student demands for simplistic, instrumentalist, 'tool-kit' approaches to professional preparation.⁶⁴

But resistance is not sufficient as a form of collaborative experimentation and, in this sense, pedagogy needs to engage students in personal and collaborative negotiation of the uncertainties and paradoxes within which education's transformative potential may be explored. This implies seeing the self of educational and economic discourse not as fixed by and within transactional modes of instrumentalist exchange, but rather as '*still to come*, not as a *future* reality but as that which will always retain the essential structure of a promise and as that which can only arrive as such, as *to come*'.⁶⁵ The becoming self must be located 'as one who comes into presence through the non-disposable, non-calculable call of the other'⁶⁶ who is yet to come. This opens up a paradox in which, according to Shilpi Sinha:

we are kept open to otherness through the interminable process of re-imagining and re-inventing our response to the other; interminable precisely because once enacted, our response to the other has already missed the mark. The other is as a-venir—the yet to come, and is thus indicative of otherness that has not yet been re-collected into the system. Aporia opens us to the excess or the remains which cannot be gathered up in any economy.⁶⁷

In marketised and commodified higher education sectors, such an understanding requires refusing the kinds of certainties that underpin instrumentalist approaches to education, and engaging instead in a conceptual and political project of understanding that ‘it is only by being actively engaged in contradictions that we can be open to the other and re-invent something else’.⁶⁸ Such approaches offer a powerful counterpoint to the instrumentalist demands of contemporary tertiary education, and suggest alternative ways of engaging students with tertiary learning as a subjective and relational process of becoming rather than as an academic or economic transaction.

In addition, I would argue, pedagogy needs to play a far more active part in engaging students in deconstructing the conditions of their own learning. As Derrida observes in relation to philosophical pedagogy:

For a long time, therefore, it has been necessary (coherent and programmed) that deconstruction not limit itself to the conceptual content of philosophical pedagogy, but that it challenge the philosophical scene, all its institutional norms and forms, as well as everything that makes them possible.⁶⁹

Turning, together with students, the gaze of inquiry toward the disciplinary and discursive conditions and norms of higher education itself is crucial to the kinds of collaborative experimentation called for here, precisely because it requires that the logics, contradictions, ambivalences and inequalities that structure epistemological orders be opened up to interrogation. This is necessary if we are to:

accomplish the unsettling of dominant educational discourses into which our students are being inducted—those discourses that privilege the position of authorised ‘knowers’ over those they teach, and that establish and maintain unequal relations of power within educational hierarchies—and to instead invite students to not only comprehend, but to also engage with and evaluate, the official knowledges produced through academic writing.⁷⁰

Collaborative experimentation in this sense suggests that educational discourse reinvigorate its emphasis on the ‘importance of academic learning in the processes of producing subjectivities and social relations within which academic learning is valued for its potential to challenge, sustain, and think anew’.⁷¹ This implies an

approach to pedagogy that relies not on technicist rationalities, hierarchical power relations, disciplinary certainties or epistemological truths, but rather on the necessity of transformative practice and its potential for addressing our co-implications in current discursive norms.

—I, WE, THEY: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON UNDISCIPLINING ECONOMIC SUBJECTIVITIES

Here, I have considered how educational policy discourse and pedagogic practice configure subjectivities in economic terms. I have argued that in the context of higher education, pedagogic encounter—and the subjective and collective possibilities represented therein—is disciplined through discourses of education as a form of economic transaction. I have also argued that the predominance of economic discourse can be potentially disrupted through an *undisciplining* of economic subjectivities, both acknowledging our co-implication in the economic and educational order, and experimenting with alternative ways of being and doing in tertiary settings. In particular, I have considered how economic subjectivities in higher education can be queried through normative pedagogic encounters that simultaneously embrace, refuse and reinscribe disciplinary technologies associated with economic participation. Importantly, I contend the ‘I, we, they’ of higher education are co-implicated in producing, maintaining and potentially reconfiguring the meanings and practices of educational and economic discourse.

While this work is not intended as a means of resolving the numerous complexities and contradictions that are woven through academic life, I find the potential for re-envisioning and *undisciplining* of economic subjectivities to offer some promising lines of inquiry. Recognising the production of subjectivities as an ongoing and dynamic process in which education is profoundly implicated, there would seem to be an imperative to explore pedagogic possibilities that emerge in response to economic politics. Reconfiguring the language of economy to incorporate and enact alternatives to the hyper-masculinist and dehumanising metaphors currently favoured in national and institutional policies would seem an important step forward. Similarly, attention to actively cultivating subjectivities who can desire and enact economies that resist inequalities, acknowledge complicities, and foster collegialities is needed in tertiary environments if education is to fulfil its potential as a means of social transformation. Collaboratively exploring and

experimenting with alternative economic and educational discursive practices is similarly necessary if we are to find new ways of *undisciplining* the subject of higher education in present times.

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—NOTES

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