

SUTTON: THE STRATEGIC APPROACH TO STUDYING, AND THE VALUE OF ASSESSMENT

The Strategic Approach to Studying, and the Value of Assessment

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‘Nothing is as practical as a good theory’
(Lewin 1945: 129).

Paul Sutton
University of St Mark & St John, Plymouth
psutton@marjon.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper I seek to reflexively theorise the following pedagogical problem: why do so many students adopt a strategic approach to studying and value assessment for the grade awarded rather than as a learning opportunity? Firstly, I differentiate my sociological perspective from the phenomenographic perspective, and argue that the strategic approach is worthy of serious analysis. Secondly, I deploy the concepts social character and the social individual to argue that the strategic approach is a product of extrinsic rather than intrinsic forces: it emanates from within the social relations of contemporary capitalism. Thirdly, I frame the strategic approach as academic labour using concepts from Marx’s labour theory of value: use and exchange value, concrete and abstract labour. This enables me to explain how assessment has become commodified and why students have a limiting quasi-market concept of value that privileges grades over learning. Finally, I argue that Marx’s dialectical method of enquiry enables practitioners to not only deconstruct the strategic approach to studying but also to challenge it.

Key Words

Theory, strategic approach, value, labour, dialectical method of enquiry.

Introduction: The Reflexive Theorising of a Tempered Radical

This paper is part of my on-going endeavour to understand, through the reflexive application of Marxist Humanist theory, how the academic character of the university students I teach is structured by the social relations of contemporary capitalism, and how this impacts upon their learning behaviour (Sutton 2015, 2016). The type of reflexivity deployed here is ‘introspective’, part of my internal professional dialogue about what I do and how I can do it better (Finlay 2002). It is a form of reflexivity that uses my own professional experience as the basis for understanding the pedagogical process (Finlay’ 2002). My thoughts and reflections on my Higher Education practice are the evidence I use for my theorising. Thus, the privilege I claim for my narrative is that it is based upon over twenty years’ experience of teaching sociology on a range of programmes of study as diverse as Speech and Language Therapy to Education Studies in a post-1992 teaching-led university. I acknowledge that I am part of what I am researching, and passionately committed thereto, not a detached observer. Being self-reflexive is part of my attempt to dialectically overcome the subject-object, knower-known antinomy (see below). My intention therefore is not to add to the multitude of empirical research projects upon student approaches to learning and studying but rather to explore the possibility of its reflexive re-theorization using personal pedagogic testimony. This then is the testimony of a university teacher with the professional identity of a ‘tempered radical’. Meyerson (2001:5) defines tempered radicals as ‘cautious and committed catalysts who keep going and who slowly make a difference; people who are organizational insiders’ yet ‘who are at odds with the dominant culture’; people who try to think outside of the box because they perceive themselves to be not entirely within it.

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My aim here is to reflexively theorize the way in which the social relations of contemporary capitalism structure the social identity, the approach to studying, and the value placed upon assessments by the university students I teach. I will argue that today studying has become an abstract activity and assessments have become commodities valued predominantly in quantitative terms. In short, the cost-benefit calculus students deploy structures studying as an activity that must be performed in order to attain a grade. Thus, assessment is enclosed within a limiting market concept: it is a means to the end of certification, (and thereafter a job). Assessment tends not be valued in and of itself. My contention is that Marxist Humanist theory enabled me to both understand the relationship between studying and assessment, and has provided insights into how that relationship can be challenged. Throughout, my aim is not to contribute to the development of Marxian theory but rather to provide university teachers with a 'good theory' (Ur 2001) and some useful concepts that they can use in their everyday pedagogical practice.

The Strategic Approach to Studying: A Sociological Perspective

I seek to differentiate my theoretical sociological perspective from the empirical phenomenographic perspective (for example, Turner & Baskerville, 2013, Liff & Rovio-Johansson, 2014).

Phenomenographic work argues that: 'A student's approach to learning is not a personal characteristic of a student but rather a way of describing how a student interacts with a particular learning task' (Turner & Baskerville, 2013: 583). My argument is that a student's approach to studying is powerfully shaped by their social character not simply their interaction with a learning task. More specifically, I argue that phenomenographic research, especially that emerging from canonical works such as Entwistle & Ramsden (1983), Entwistle (2000) and Ramsden (2003), underestimates both the significance of the strategic approach to studying and the determinative power of the social.

Within pedagogic discourse in the UK Entwistle & Ramsden (1983), Entwistle (2000) and Ramsden (2003) established the twofold classification of deep and surface approaches to learning. The strategic approach, and its opposite the apathetic approach, are classified not as approaches to learning but as derivative approaches to studying. Thus, the strategic approach 'indicate(s) how students act in everyday situations' (Entwistle, 2000:3) not approaches to learning. The strategic approach to studying is defined as an approach that intends 'to achieve the highest possible grades by using organised study methods and good time-management' and which also involves self – monitoring and 'an alertness to the assessment process' (Entwistle, 2000:3).

The strategic approach disappears in Ramsden (2003) and is relegated to only a cameo role in Entwistle (2009). Both authors concentrate solely upon the surface and deep approaches to learning. Similarly, Turner and Baskerville (2013:583) argue that the 'strategic approach does not represent a qualitatively different approach to learning separate from surface or deep approaches.' In my experience student's approach to their studies is overwhelmingly strategic. Deep or surface approaches are deployed strategically in pursuit of grades. It is the capitalist cost-benefit calculus, rather than the learning task per se, that shapes the nature of student's interactions with everyday assessment situations.

As a sociologist, I am very interested in the sociological significance of the everyday, and how students interact with the everyday situation of studying for assessments. So for me studying is of enormous significance and is worthy of serious analysis in and of its own right, not simply as a residual category. Entwistle (2009:29) acknowledges that a sociological perspective on the relationship between identity and student's approaches to learning and study is important, but it is not part of his research paradigm. Ramsden (2003:49), however, asserts that the 'socio-cultural origin' of deep and surface approaches to learning, and by implication the now absent strategic approach to studying, is not of importance. Furthermore, he argues that by trying to change student

approaches from surface to deep teachers are 'not trying to change students, but to change the students' experiences, perceptions or conceptions' (Ramsden, 2003:45). From my sociological perspective, if teachers change their students' experiences, perceptions or conceptions then they are indeed changing their students as human beings, they are changing their student's social character.

Thus, my aim is to sociologically explore the strategic approach to studying and to argue that by changing that approach we change our students' social character. Furthermore, I will argue that student's social character is engendered extrinsically: first and foremost, the product of particular, historical, capitalist social relations. To do this I shall deploy the Marxian concepts of social character and the social individual. My intention is to 'dissolve the boundaries between the self and the social' (Dinerstein, 1997:83).

The Social Dimensions of the Student Self: Social Character and the Social Individual

My argument is that the dominance of the strategic approach to studying is as much product of extrinsic as intrinsic forces. It emanates from within the social relations of contemporary capitalism. In order to elucidate this contention I shall briefly explore the concepts social character and the social individual.

Fromm's reframing of the self as social character stems from his Marxist conception of human beings as quintessentially productive and that in the process of producing life people produce themselves as human beings (Fromm, 1961, 2011). So, I conceive my students to possess the potential for creative productivity. They realize that creativity through the academic labour of studying and assessment. It is through these activities that they produce themselves as students. Activity creates 'social character'. Both student's activity and their minds are 'social in their content as well as their *origin*' (Marx in Fromm, 1961: 129).

Fromm defined social character as a specific type of relatedness to the world. Thus, as the capitalist mode of production changes so does social character. For example, my students relate to the world of studying in the globalized, twenty-first century social context of a 'quasi-marketized' (Barnett, 2011), mass Higher Education system influenced by a neo-liberal agenda. Whereas, I was a student in a more elite, twentieth century state funded Higher Education system that shaped my relatedness to the world and studying in a very different way. The social character of the students I teach is, therefore, structured differently from the social character of students, including myself, in the past.

Fromm argues that social character is the product of the way in which human energy is channelled into the reproduction of capitalism. People must develop those character traits that make them desire to act in ways they have to act (Fromm, 1963; 2003). Thus extrinsic necessities become internalized in order to ensure the reproduction of the capitalist socio-economic system. Education then is 'the means by which social requirements are transformed into personal qualities' (Fromm, 1962:245). For example, the interactions I have with students on a daily basis lead me to believe that they have internalised the external necessity of the cost-benefit calculus as it is an important personal quality necessary for the reproduction of contemporary 'short term' (Sennett, 1998) or 'impatient capitalism' (Sennett, 2006).

Thus, studying and assessment tend not to be valued in themselves but simply as means to the end of grades and certification. In this way thinking is reduced to 'grasping things quickly so as to be able to manipulate them successfully' as 'all that is necessary to know is the surface features of things, the superficial' (Fromm, 2003: 55). The main incentive for studying is not intrinsic, not interest in the subjects being studied, but extrinsic, the grade.

For Marx, the way the capitalist mode of production is organised shapes social character. Production transforms the world and in so doing changes the nature of humans themselves. The means used (means of production) and the relationships (social relations of production) that structure the labour produce us as social individuals. The nature of the social individual is central to the work of a comparatively unknown Marxist psychologist Lucien Seve. Seve bases his concept of the social individual on Marx's 6th Thesis on Feuerbach. Human nature, Marx argues, 'is not an abstraction inherent in each individual' but emerges from 'the totality of social relations' (Bottomore & Rubel, 1963: 83). What is crucial to understanding the social individual is 'the determinant role of social labour and thus of the relations of production' (Seve, 1978:152). Social character lies not within the individual but rather in society which is itself determined by the 'production and reproduction of the means of subsistence' (Seve, 1978:400).

In sum, the concepts social character and the social individual have enabled me to frame the strategic approach to studying as a social phenomenon. The origins of this approach lie not within the interior landscape of the student self but rather within the exterior landscape of the social relations of contemporary capitalism that structure academic labour. Students have become the personification and embodiment of capitalist socio-economic categories and relations (Marx, 1946). Thus, in my quasi-marketised university student's energy is channelled in such a way that they experience their own academic labour as an abstract activity, and value the assessments they produce primarily for the grade awarded.

Using concepts from Marx's (1946) labour theory of value, I will now argue, can assist university teachers in understanding the cause and the cure of the limiting strategic approach to studying adopted by many of the students they teach.

The Twofold Nature of Academic Labour: Use Value and Exchange Value

The two fold nature of labour occupies a pivotal position Marx's critique of capitalism (Holloway 2010). These concepts began life in the analysis of alienated labour in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and were developed in *Capital* (Holloway, 2010). But whereas the earlier analysis of the alienation of labour had as its focus the individual labourer's experience of estrangement, or separation from the labour process, the product of production, self and other; the later analysis of abstract labour focuses on the social character of labour, and the totality of social relations within which the individual labourer is imbricated.

So what is use value? As Marx (1946:8) observes: 'Whoever directly satisfies his (sic) wants with the produce of his own labour, creates, indeed, use values, but not commodities.' A use-value directly satisfies a human need or desire. For example, the use value of an assessment would be its power to satisfy a student's need or desire to learn. Furthermore, 'the use-value of objects is realised without exchange, by means of a direct relation between the objects and man' (Marx, 1946:55) Thus, an assessment, produced as a use value, has a direct, predominantly subjective, qualitative value. Its value is not realized by being exchanged for a grade but rather in the process of its production, in actually doing the learning and writing for a sociology or a psychology or a philosophy etc. essay.

The type of academic labour oriented to the production of use values is 'useful labour' (Marx, 1946:177). It is 'concrete, or qualitatively differentiated' (Cohen, 1978: 101). Use value is concrete living labour or 'the specific expression of a living person's abilities' (Seve, 1978:152). So, in the case of an essay, concrete academic labour is not a standardised answer which simply meets learning outcomes, which is then quantified as a grade in accordance with grade descriptors. Concrete labour requires learner engagement, the creative expression of academic labour. In contrast, exchange value is the product of abstract labour which is the very substance of exchange value (Harvie, 2006). But what is exchange value?

Exchange-value is the antithesis of use value. It is 'a property of use-values which possess commodity status. The exchange-value of a commodity is its power of exchanging against quantities of other commodities.' (Cohen, 1978:347). For example, an essay becomes a commodity when its concrete use value is subjugated by its abstract exchange value. An essay is not produced as 'a definite, useful object' is not produced to satisfy the desire to learn, but simply as commodity to be exchanged for the currency of a grade (Marx, 1946:177). The grade in turn will be converted into the currency of module credits, and when sufficient credits have been accumulated, to be exchanged for a degree within the quasi-market of the university. These are the phases of the 'metamorphosis' of the assessment as commodity (Marx 1946: 88). Hence for many of my students it would appear that assessment has only an objective, quantitative value: its grade and contribution to module credits and degree classification.

When assessment becomes commodified, value, which Marx argues is in reality a qualitative social relation between people, takes on a quantitative form and appears to be a relationship between things. This is what Marx called commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism occurs when 'the mutual relations of the producers within which the character of their labour affirms itself, takes the form of a social relation between the products' (Marx, 1946:42). Thus the human quality of the relationship between people – between myself and my students – becomes disguised as a quantitative relationship between things - information, assessments, grades, credits, degree classification – all controlled by the 'invisible hand' of the higher education quasi-market.

As a result a contradiction has emerged within the academic labour process. My students appear to value learning predominantly as a means to the end of accumulating sufficient information to complete assessments; whereas I value assessments as a way of learning, of maximising reason, of enabling critical thinking and self-directed learning. Increasingly, from my student's perspective, our relationship becomes a relationship between the products of our labour. I produce information that they reproduce in assessments; I then transform the assessment through more academic labour into a grade. In this process, our social relation of learner and teacher is dehumanised: studying becomes abstract labour and assessments become commodities.

Abstract and Concrete Labour and the Commodification of Assessment

As stated earlier, my purpose in this paper is to reflexively apply theory to practice: to use concepts provided by Marxism to understand the nature of my student's academic labour and why their approach to studying has become predominately strategic. The concepts of abstract and concrete labour are very useful tools for achieving this purpose.

'Labour productive of exchange-value', as Cohen (1978:101) observes, 'is abstract, just a featureless proportion of the total labour of society'. Thus, when studying becomes abstract labour it loses its distinctiveness, loses its specific qualities. I teach on inter-disciplinary degree programmes that combine sociology, psychology, social policy and philosophy modules. In my experience, the academic knowledge, skills and abilities required by different types of academic labour and different forms of assessments in different modules tends to become homogenised. The different products of different forms of academic labour are equated with each other through the grade. Studying becomes abstract; it is experienced and measured simply in terms of the generalised quantities of time and information necessary to produce a grade. Studying becomes the mechanical exercise of labour; assessment is devoid of intrinsic value and becomes just another commodity to be exchanged for a grade. Different kinds of academic labour are therefore equalized, reduced to their common denominator: the 'expenditure of human labour power or human labour in the abstract' (Marx, 1946:44).

However, all is not lost. The labour of studying is not condemned to the fate of being irretrievably abstract. For, Marx argues, 'concrete and abstract labour are two sides of the same labour which is opposed to itself' (Seve, 1978:153). Concrete and abstract labour are contradictory and antagonistic dimensions of the same labour activity but their 'intrinsic oneness expresses itself in an external antithesis' (Marx 1946:87). However, in capitalist societies concrete labour is subordinated to abstract labour. As Holloway remarks the tension between concrete doing and abstract labour is an everyday lived experience. For example, as a university teacher I experience 'the tension between teaching well and grading and producing the necessary number of graduates' (Holloway, 2010:172). Similarly, my students experience the tension between the concrete labour of following their interests and the cost-benefit calculus of chasing grades in order to achieve an upper second degree classification.

When studying becomes abstract labour then assessments become commodities. The commodification of assessment means the power of abstraction often wins out and assessments are simply completed to be exchanged for a grade. Their individual value lies in their exchangeability for a grade and their collective value in their exchangeability for a degree certificate and thereafter a job. The academic labour power students invest in assessment is invested in order to be exchanged. What is important is the quantity of grades (and credits) not the quality of learning.

The exchange value of assessments cannot, and perhaps should not, be entirely eradicated. Recognition and acceptance of this dimension of value can act as a driver for transparency and accountability. Explicit learning outcomes, assessment criteria and level descriptors can be used as a means to the necessary ends of rigour and parity. However, the dominance of abstract labour, exchange value and the commodification of assessment in my student's strategic approach is leading to their de-skilling. This has resulted in a chronic dependence on learning outcomes, assessment and grade criteria etc. Students (and their teachers) are becoming mere appendages to the information machine within the knowledge factory. Students are becoming less and less able to take responsibility and control of their studies.

In sum, in my experience the dominance of abstract labour, the commodification of assessment, and the alienation of the learner tends to enclose assessment within the limiting quasi-market concept of value. However, the social relations of production of the new capitalism that engender the strategic approach to studying can be challenged. As Holloway (2010) argues, it is not possible to get outside of capitalism. But it is possible to go against capitalism from within, to occupy the cracks in capitalist educational institutions and to provide glimpses of possible alternatives. He defines a crack as 'the perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing' (Holloway 2010:21). A crack is where we can work 'in-against-and- beyond' abstraction, commodification, alienation and market value. Indeed, Holloway (2010:33) remarks:

...just doing something for its own sake can be seen as an anti-capitalist crack, simply because it breaks the instrumental chain of reasoning typical of capitalism, whereby everything has to be justified as a means to an end...

Thus, interstitial possibilities exist for the abstract labour of studying to become 'concrete doing'. Holloway (2010: 84) defines concrete doing as 'an activity that is not necessarily subject to alien determination, an activity that is potentially-self-determining.' Concrete doing is productive activity which has use value. For assessments to become concrete doing I endeavour to encourage my students to cultivate an artisanal rather than a mechanical approach to studying. I acknowledge that grades and certification are important drivers but adopting a craft approach of doing an assessment well for the sake of it offers the potential of both extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction. When assessments become 'conscious life activity' (Marx in Fromm, 2011:101) they offer opportunities not

only for the accumulation of grades but also for rewarding learning opportunities and enhanced student satisfaction.

To unveil possibilities for breaking the instrumental chain of reasoning from within, I need now to offer an explanation of the dialectical method of enquiry that underpins my reflexive theorizing. For the dialectical method is a way of revealing more of what lies beneath the surface appearance of the strategic approach and how it may be challenged.

Challenging Instrumental Reason: The Dialectical Method of Enquiry

The foundation of the dialectical method is 'the inner-connectedness of individuals and relations' (Shames 1981:14). To understand this inner-connectedness we need to apply a what Fromm (1962) calls 'paradoxical logic'. This form of logic is based on the assumption that 'A and non-A do not exclude each other as predicates of X' (Fromm (1962: 120). To elucidate paradoxical logic Fromm draws a comparison with the form of logic which is hegemonic in western societies: Aristotelian logic. This form of logic is based on three assumptions: firstly, *identity*: A is A; secondly, *non-contradiction*: A is not non-A; and thirdly, the *excluded middle*: A cannot be A and non-A, neither A nor non-A. In the paradoxical logic of dialectics A is both A and not-A. For example, the use value of assessment is not identical with itself as it is contained in exchange value. The use-exchange value relation is therefore inherently contradictory. Use value is both itself and not itself. It is in this paradoxical relationship that the potential for change lies. Paradoxical logic also explains the dialectical relation between concrete and abstract labour of studying. Concrete labour exists within the form of abstract labour but it is not completely constrained by it.

We can use the dialectical method then to re-frame studying and assessment as complex webs of interpenetrating opposites, each relationally contained in the other (Olmann, 1976). For example, in paradoxical logic quality is contained within quantity: so quantity can be transformed into quality. So my students can be encouraged to not only ask me the oft repeated question: 'Tell me what I need to do get a 2:1?'. They may also ask: 'How can I creatively engage with this assessment so I can enhance my learning?' This transformation is energized by the contradictory social relations in the knowledge production process: between my students who are primarily motivated to study by the prospect of obtaining a professional job and myself as a teacher motivated by emancipatory power of education. Through dialectical struggle a re-valorisation of studying and assessment is possible. As a group of year 3 students declared 'I don't care what grade I get as long as I pass, I have learnt so much' (Module Evaluation Form 2015). However, re-valorisation is often momentary and incomplete; characterised by nullity and refusal, as well as moments of engaged, self-determined activity (Marx in Fromm 2011). Not all the student responses to learning and teaching on this module were as positive.

In addition, from a teacher's perspective, I have frequently experienced the up-hill struggle to challenge the strategic approach to studying and to re-valorise assessment as both frustrating and exhausting. The dialectical struggle of teaching carries us 'back and forth, from elation to despair, from despair to hope and determination, and back again' (Holloway, 2010:83). Despite periods of despair, I continue the struggle because I have faith in the value of what I do and an understanding that the complete re-valorisation of studying and assessment exists as the 'Not-Yet' (Bloch, 1986). The 'Not Yet' is 'lightning flashes of a world that could be' (Holloway, 2010:176). For me, the 'Not Yet' is, therefore, a source of pedagogical hope, it is in-against-and beyond present limitations. The present, I believe, is latent with alternative more humane futures (Sutton, 2015; 2011).

In short, the paradoxical logic of the dialectical method of enquiry enables us to both penetrate beneath the surface appearance of the strategic approach to studying and to challenge it. For example, in a Level 6 social science module, with 25 students from education studies and social

science programmes, I endeavoured to challenge the competitive relationship that characterise the strategic approach to studying (Turner & Baskerville, 2013) by suggesting to students that cooperative social relations of learning and teaching produce better grades for all and provide richer educational experiences for both tutor and student. Based upon the principle of mutual aid we engaged in collective problem based learning. The assessment was a conventional essay, but an essay embodying enquiry based study, on a topic of interest chosen by students, based on a question co-created through dialogically by myself and each student in an individual tutorial. Students were thereby not competing with each other to reproduce answers to standard questions. Rather, the emphasis was on student's discovering relevant knowledge through study rather than the transmission of knowledge through teaching.

However, my experience was that such a re-structuring of studying induces resistance. My students often display a tendency to assessment conservatism. They tend to fear the autonomy and freedom enquiry based study demands (Fromm 1960). I was put under considerable pressure by some students to write essay questions for them. Similarly, in a level 5 module on the social dimensions of communication, 4 students of a mixed cohort of 24 English and Social Science students immediately transferred out of the module when they understood the meaning and demands of enquiry based study.

Being an experienced Higher Education teacher committed to a tempered radical pedagogy enabled me to resist such pressures. For colleagues at an earlier stage of their teaching careers these pressures may be overwhelming. Furthermore, conservatism and fear of freedom are, in my view, institutionally reinforced by overly bureaucratised assessment regimes that enforce standardization, create over-dependence on learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and grade descriptors. In addition, undergraduate students are not only a more diverse group 'less well prepared for university learning' than in the past (Entwistle, 2009:18). They have also, in my experience, been primarily been 'taught to the test'. The result is that students I teach now reach me less well equipped than ever to take responsibility for their own studying and to make effective use of the traditional freedoms university study presents.

Conclusion: Theory and Practice

It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity, cease to be antinomies and thus cease to exist as such antinomies. The resolution of the *theoretical* contradictions is possible *only* through *practical* means, only through the practical energy of man (sic)

(Marx in Fromm, 2011:135).

The problem that prompted this paper emerged from the everyday reality of university teaching: why do so many students adopt a strategic approach to studying and value assessment for the grade awarded, rather than as a learning opportunity? I have attempted to address this problem through the reflexive practical application of Marxist-humanist theory to the behaviour of my students and my own pedagogical praxis. I have sought to differentiate my theoretical sociological perspective from the empirical phenomenographic perspective by emphasising the determinative power of the social and the importance of the strategic approach to studying. To do this I deployed a range of Marxian concepts to demonstrate that the strategic approach is a product of extrinsic forces within contemporary capitalism.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide university teachers with some conceptual tools that they can use in their everyday pedagogical practice. To this end I have conceptualised the strategic approach to studying as abstract academic labour with exchange value and assessment as a commodity. Using the dialectical method of enquiry I have also sought to demonstrate how the

strategic approach can be challenged both conceptually and in practice. Assessment can become concrete doing with use value. Challenging the strategic approach from within is possible. As I have shown, within my quasi-marketised university pedagogic space exists for small but significant changes to be made to the social relations of learning and teaching. In everyday, face-to-face interactions with students and their studies it is possible to work in-against-and-beyond abstract labour, exchange value and commodification. Indeed, I consider that the small challenges I have made to the strategic approach to studying are vital to not only enhancing the educational experience of my students but also to maintaining my identity as a tempered radical pedagogue. Furthermore, such challenges are also small steps toward changing my university from an increasingly de-humanised corporation into a 'feasible utopia' (Barnett, 2011).

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