

“Do You Want Fries With That?”: The McDonaldization of University Education—Some Critical Reflections on Nursing Higher Education

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Abstract

Public universities, as the predominant source of nurse education, serve an instrumental role as pressure mounts to produce large numbers of workready graduates to meet the needs of the labor market. Neoliberalism is recognized as the dominant political and economic philosophy across the globe, and new managerialist, corporatized practices, as its “organizational arms,” are ubiquitous within the higher education sector worldwide. Intersecting this agenda are dramatic developments in the way university courses are being conceived and delivered based upon the increasing integration of digital technologies. Given the radical transformations brought about by Web 2.0 technologies, it is timely to critically analyze current narratives shaping the teaching and learning agenda and their impact on the nature and quality of nursing higher education. This article draws on the “McDonaldization thesis” of George Ritzer, concepts from the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Habermasian social theory, and critical pedagogy. It concludes with a short overview of possible outcomes of the new agenda, and some strategies for resistance. Although the focus is on Australia, it is relevant to other countries to the extent that they are facing similar challenges and undergoing analogous pedagogic transformations.

Keywords

technology, neoliberalism, McDonaldization, nursing, higher education

Introduction

Although both Marx and Engels recognized the potentially alienating effect of technology, they also witnessed it liberating workers from the drudgery of the factory production line and back-breaking physical labor. Engels, taking a less optimistic standpoint than Marx, cautioned that without socialist revolution, new technology would serve the ends of those continuing to control the means of production (Gouldner, 1980) and entail new forms of exploitation. Neither could have envisaged what “technology” would come to mean nor how it would come to dominate every aspect of human life to the point of becoming integrated into our sense of self-identity.

Throughout history, educational artifacts—the chalkboard, pen and paper, the overhead projector, the computer, and all the other paraphernalia of the classroom—have been used by educators, under their control, and largely at their discretion, to enhance the quality of teaching. Much has been written regarding the profound (digital) revolution that has taken place in the last two decades, whereby technology is no longer an aid but a powerful shaper of education as a national

project, to the extent that it now largely determines the educational process in institutional and “classroom” settings across all levels of education (Gosper et al., 2008; Green, Banas, & Perkins, 2017; Hamilton, 2016; Pachler & Daly, 2011; Price & Kirkwood, 2014; Spector, 2016). With remarkable prescience, philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich (1926–2002), in his well-known book *Deschooling Society* (1971), proposed a radical change to schools as institutions. He argued that they did not achieve their goals and should be replaced by more effective educational systems, or what he called “learning webs.” Contemporary “open” and “blended” learning environments echo Illich’s vision of an educational system characterized by openness, flexibility, and networks as vehicles via which student learning occurred through

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connections to knowledge points (Czerkawski, 2016). Indeed, in many instances, the traditional notion of a physical classroom has been replaced by a virtual, asynchronous entity within a learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard, Brightspace, or Moodle.

The information age, made accessible by a plethora of connectivity choices and “in the cloud,” social media and Web 2.0 technologies, requires students and academics to possess new types of digital and information literacies and employ them in the environments in which they live, work, and learn (Jahnke, 2016). In recent years, personal learning environments (PLE), based upon Web 2.0 applications, have been used within higher education courses as a means by which students negotiate and manage their own learning (Laakkonen, 2011; Patterson et al., 2017). The utility and effectiveness of such environments is beginning to be empirically evaluated (e.g., de Pablos, Tennyson, & Lytras, 2015; Meyer, Wohlers, & Marshall, 2014), and although the range of courses, contexts, and student outcomes currently remains limited, they are becoming the norm in nurse education and health care. Nurses in clinical practice environments are also increasingly being required to utilize technologies such as telehealth, electronic health records, patient tracking systems and their applications, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and in staff and patient education interactions (Guo, Watts, & Wharrad, 2016); of necessity, therefore, nurses are required to understand and utilize such technologies safely and effectively, within the context of a burgeoning “nursing informatics” agenda which in Australia has, *inter alia*, spawned a special interest group of so-called nursing informaticians within a Nursing Informatics Australia special interest group, under the aegis of the Health Informatics Society of Australia (HISA). Not surprisingly, a freshly minted set of Informatics (competency) Standards for all Nurses and Midwives in Australia (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation [ANMF], 2015) has been produced. All nurses and midwives are “encouraged” to use these Standards, “. . . to ensure they are equipped to meet the information literacy and management demands of contemporary nursing and midwifery practice for the benefit of the Australian community.” (ANMF, 2015, p. 1).

Technology, Society, and Higher Education

Contemporary academic work, workplaces, and modes of staff–staff and staff–student engagement are being transformed by a vertiginous array of new technologies. Corbett, MacIntyre, and Mewburn (2014), citing Weller (2011), refer to technologies as the “pedagogy of abundance,” reflected in the “openness” and availability of educational content via the Internet. These neoteric technologies have spawned many for-profit and not-for-profit organizations such as Coursera, Udacity, and EdX (Corbett et al., 2014). Such organizations offer large catalogues of courses delivered

globally as massive online open courses, or MOOCs (Waks, 2016). New digital platforms, and their associated digital and social media, offer compelling and innovative options for teaching and learning for both students and faculty. These technologies are being embraced as the external environment becomes increasingly competitive, government funding to public universities is reduced, and there are economic imperatives to “scale up” by teaching greater numbers of students, and a greater push to commodify educational offerings (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013). However, rather than liberating creativity, promoting innovation, and increasing autonomy, the ways in which new educational technologies are currently utilized within higher education environments characterized by increased managerialization tend to produce conformity and increase compliance by prescribing what may be done and how it may be done.

Managerialism, with its tendency toward micromanagement, increases the ease of monitoring the degree of compliance, and in this way, technology and managerialism work synergistically as a machinery of control and surveillance of both staff and students (Connell, 2013; Orr & Orr, 2016). Furthermore, these are largely self-managed and serve to maintain a self-imposed conformity, processes which the Italian social philosopher Antonio Gramsci argued constitute the highest forms of hegemony and social control (Cone, 2017). Examples of this are readily seen in the higher education sector and include the increasing intrusiveness and regulation of teaching and learning processes, greater requirement for standardization of course materials within a “blended learning” agenda, centralization of core administrative tasks, and the use of questionable metrics to quantify the quality of teaching (Ashwin, 2016; Martin-Sardesai, Irvine, Tooley, & Guthrie, 2017; Woelert & Yates, 2015).

The Bradley Review into higher education in Australia (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) led to the development of the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC) and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the latter becoming the central regulatory agency of higher education. Establishment of the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) and the Excellence in Research Excellence (ERA) initiative are further instantiations of the power of the regulatory state to set benchmarks and threshold standards with which Universities must comply. Within the nursing context, the pre-eminent role and status of national organizations such as the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA), and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) further contribute to the regulatory framework which has, *inter alia*, increasingly shaped the spheres of policy, clinical practice, management, education, and workforce production (Parry & Grant, 2016). Complex layers of quality-oriented compliance imposed by such organizations challenge “traditional” academic practice and are, as Foucault reminds us, means by which the panoptic model of surveillance and

control are established and maintained (Jarvis, 2014). Concurrent with these changes, the delivery of nursing and midwifery courses within the Australian higher education sector, like other professional degrees, is also experiencing significant internal and external discipline-oriented challenges. Departments of nursing and midwifery across Australia are under pressure to produce increasing numbers of graduates, not only due to economic forces within universities but also because of the rapidly approaching workforce shortage as the baby boomers leave the workforce, and more nurses are required to meet the growing demands of an aging population globally. Additional discipline-based challenges include the growing internationalization of the workforce; the aging of the existing workforce; the need for scalable, affordable models of clinical supervision of undergraduates when on placement and increasing pressure to graduate “work-ready” Registered Nurses within 3 years (E. E. Patterson, Boyd, & Mnatzaganian, 2017), when all other equivalent undergraduate health professional degrees are 4 to 6 years in duration. Addressing these challenges within a higher education system that is subject to a complex regulatory “architecture” while endeavoring to meet the challenges of teaching, scholarship, and research has highlighted significant support needs for both existing and future nurse academics (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2012). Within such environments, it is hardly surprising that from among 18 leading academic nations, only British academics had lower work satisfaction scores than Australians (Fredman & Doughney, 2012); moreover, increasing levels of occupational stress among academic staff have been reported (Darabi, Macaskill, & Reidy, 2016; Melin, Astvik, & Bernhard-Oettel, 2014; Winefield et al., 2003).

Quantification is an integral feature of managerialism, and all-pervasive in the competitive world of the corporate university. Empirical tools by which to judge institutional and individual teaching and research performance are now commonplace, and the global ranking of universities has become normalized. However, as Lynch (2015, p.201) has highlighted, “the task of ranking 500 incomparable institutions on multiple criteria across different countries and continents is ethically questionable, empirically challenging, and, arguably of primary value to the wealthier students who can choose which university to attend.”

The Neoliberal Turn

In the last decade, neoliberalism has become the dominant philosophy in almost every sphere of life (Brown, 2015), and its impact on higher education has been widely analyzed. Urban (2016), for example, citing the work of Giroux, describes a number of ways in which the “rationality of neoliberalism” and economic market values manifest themselves in higher education, including standardization, a focus on vocationally oriented courses, a much stronger business development profile in partnership with industry to diversify

income streams, and a greater commitment to measureable economic outcomes. Because of this focus, it has been argued that neoliberalism in the context of higher education operates to stifle scholarship, and therefore, it is no exaggeration to characterize it as anti-academic. Indeed, Giroux (2014) refers to neoliberalism as waging a war against higher education. In America, where neoliberal ideology is most deeply embedded, higher education has been repeatedly described, albeit for a variety of reasons, as being “in crisis” (e.g., Arum & Roksa, 2011; Blumenstyk, 2015; Carr, 2012; Fischer, 2011; Weiler, 2010). Blumenstyk (2015), for example, writes,

Many inside those institutions—as well as many without—now worry that the higher-minded aspects of higher education—to nurture students’ social, cultural, and intellectual growth and help them to develop into not just twenty-first century workers but also citizens of a twenty-first century world—are being diminished if not altogether lost. (p. 4)

Similar statements appear in publications from around the world, including Australia (e.g., Australian Parliament, 2001; Healy, 2010; Maddox, 2000), and elements of the neoliberal influence on education and its associated discourses have long been widely discussed by educationalists and intellectuals alike (Aronowitz, 2000; FitzSimmons, 2015; Freire, 1997; Giroux, 2014; Giroux, 2017; Hill, 2003; Saunders, 2015; Zepke, 2017). Giroux, echoing the Italian philosopher Agamben, argues that without a genuine critical pedagogy what is left is a “bare” version of pedagogy. By this, Giroux means a version that places emphasis on “ruthless competitiveness, hedonism, [and] the cult of individualism,” and within which “compassion is a weakness, and moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations” (Giroux, 2010, p.185). Theodor Adorno, a 20th-century philosopher, echoed this dialect in his paper *Theorie der Halbbildung* (Theory of Half Education; Adorno, 1959), arguing that “full” education is under constant threat to become merely oriented toward the interests of dominant groups to serve defined purposes. In the nursing context, we hold concerns that market demand combined with seductive economic incentives for universities to attract increasing numbers of nursing students within an increasingly commodified sector increases the likelihood that quality nursing education will be sacrificed on the altars of political expediency and economic rationalism. The flow on effect of these changes to the provision of patient care remain to be seen but will require robust, critical examination over the next decade.

Technomanagerialism in Teaching and Learning

As a consequence of more than a decade of neoliberalist influence, Australian higher education has undergone dramatic change in the core activity areas of teaching, learning, research,

and engagement (Olssen & Peters, 2005). These changes have been driven by factors such as deregulation of the sector and resultant increased competition, an intensified focus upon quality assurance, introduction of corporatization and performance-based funding models, changes to the metrics by which research quality and outputs are measured, and a steady decline in Government funding (Darbyshire, 2008; Lipton, 2015). The so-called new managerialism that underpins increasingly corporatized institutions such as universities reflects a neoliberal rationality demanding the adoption by public institutions of “technologies, management practices and values more commonly found in the private business sector” (White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011, p. 180).

Contemporary teaching and learning processes are being transformed by technomanagerialism, involving a smorgasbord of “technology-enhanced learning” (TEL) (Bayne, 2015) environments including synchronous and asynchronous web-based discussion forums, blended learning frameworks, virtual classrooms, lectures, podcasts and simulated learning experiences, loosely labeled as “edutainment.” Freely accessible web-based Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are having an increasingly pervasive influence, which Skiba (2012) has referred to as “MOOC Mania,” and Krause and Lowe’s (2014) *Invasion of the MOOCs* highlights some of the promises and perils associated with these courses. These teaching technologies are promoted as enhancing the student experience, and criticism of their use could run the risk of being seen by one’s academic colleagues as out of touch with contemporary teaching and learning practices. Adding further pressure to integrate such technologies, and reflecting a form of neo-Taylorism, educational/instructional designers are employed as experts within universities to assist faculty with the design and delivery of learning experiences (Terlouw, 2014). Nursing education, as in all other health-related disciplines, has seen a dramatic increase in the use of simulation such as high fidelity manikins. More recently, the use of virtual gaming and reality simulations involving avatars has increased, however there has been little exploration of the theoretical foundations of simulation pedagogy (Hopwood, Rooney, Boud, & Kelly, 2016; O’Connor & Domingo, 2017; Verkuyl et al., 2017).

The McDonaldization of Higher Education

An increasingly common lens through which neoliberal ideology, and its attendant technomanagerialism, is being viewed is that of sociologist George Ritzer’s “McDonaldization thesis” (1993). Drawing upon the Weberian theory of instrumental rationalization, Ritzer (1993) applies Weber’s five dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability, control, and the substitution of technology for human labor to increasingly rigid hierarchical structures within institutions, or what Weber metaphorically

described as an “iron cage” (Quinn, 2000). Its application to higher education has been widely discussed by many authors over the past three decades including, for example, Hartley (1995), and Ritzer (1996; 2002), and subsequently critiqued and refined by authors such as Hayes and Wynyard (2002), Garland (2008), Lorenz (2012), Courtois, O’Keefe, Muñoz, Hawel, and Kalmring (2015), Nadolny and Ryan (2015), and Hayes (2017).

Ralph (2013, p. 233), citing Ritzer (1996), highlights ways in which the McDonaldization of organizational systems such as universities exerts control over employees through the “graduated introduction of non-human technology” to control both product and process and to remove uncertainty. These technologies and practices potentially offer much to both staff and students in terms of virtual engagement and innovation, but increasing technicization presents some profound challenges. First, it demands continual expansion of technological literacy and access to its associated resources, such as compatible computers with high bandwidth internet connection and a working knowledge of how to navigate the nascent array of online platforms and programs. Second, not only a lack of enthusiasm for these approaches but also inability to keep pace can be used as leverage to reduce the number of tenured staff in favor of an increasingly short-term contracted or casualized workforce (Ryan, Burgess, Connell, & Groen, 2013). As George Morgan, an academic at the Western Sydney University, poignantly reminds us, being a member of the burgeoning “academic precariat” (Standing, 2011) can have fatal consequences (Morgan, 2016). Third, as Hayes and Wynyard (2002) suggested, “applying the same methods of production to the mass delivery of the higher-education curriculum can mean a simplification (dumbing down) of content in order to reach the largest number of clients” (p.187). Last, it requires significant conscious effort and institutional facilitation to retain the human face of higher education and to protect those aspects of curriculum not adequately susceptible to such methods.

Relevant here too is Chandler’s (1995) theory of “technological determinism,” which contends that the mere existence of a technology demands that it be used and developed, even when its use is unnecessary. This creates a technological imperative that compels individuals to utilize the available technology and considers them dysfunctional whether they are reluctant or refuse. Not only do academics encounter this in the university but nursing students also encounter it in the health care setting, where it has long been institutionalized (Hofmann, 2002; Rothman, 1997; Wolf & Berle, 1993). In Habermasian terms, such an imperative undermines the lifeworld by privileging technical over hermeneutic and emancipatory interests and jeopardizes those disciplines rooted in human experience (Russo, 2005). Most importantly, however, this process also alters human identity. “More than simply fabricating the hyperreal environment, technology constructs the technicized individuals that navigate through it.” (Russo, 2005, p. 33).

Technomanagerialism and Education/ University Life

Technomanagerialism promotes a retrogressive form of education that has long been severely criticized. It has a range of negative effects on the way in which knowledge is conceived, fundamentally because wholesale adoption of the business model presents knowledge as a commodity, to be bought and sold, and accessible only to those who can afford to purchase it, with all the class-related implications that entails. Furthermore, because commodified knowledge is necessarily measurable, definable, and assessable, it takes the form of a narrow technical instrumental training rather than an education.

Technology-based education also problematizes the relationship between knowledge and understanding and invokes not only Gilbert Ryle's famous distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how" but also the "knowing why" requirement of the reflective professional—a requirement placed upon all registered nurses as described within the latest standards for practice in Australia (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia [NMBA], 2016). The German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas famously distinguished three "knowledge interests": empirical, hermeneutic, and critical, constituting a more formal, empirical typology loosely corresponding to Ryle's distinctions (Terry, 1997). The ideal of technomanagerialist ideology is measurable, technical "outputs" centering on analytical empirical knowledge, preferably with demonstrable income-generating capacity. For disciplines with strong practice requirements such as nursing, and therefore with a focus on practical hermeneutic knowledge, every effort has been made to reduce the practitioner's role to a set of skills expressed as technical instrumental forms of knowledge that can be uniformly taught, learned, and assessed in minute detail. In this way, "knowing what" and "knowing how" are both accommodated, but there is little time for the "knowing why" element and even less for Habermas' third critical emancipatory knowledge interest. This third interest is not merely a matter of understanding but also of critical reflection, ethical awareness, and personal development. It seeks to raise individuals' awareness of the ways in which their world, and with it the ways in which they act, think, and feel, is socially constructed, and to that extent, stand outside the field of personal autonomy. A key aspiration is to use this awareness to empower individuals to exert an increased degree of control over their personal and professional lives. The current trend exemplifies Habermas's concept of the colonization of the lifeworld by systems, involving the gradual subversion and replacement by technical rationality of the natural world of subjectivity and taken-for-granted understandings that arise within and sustain social and psychological life.

By ignoring these aspects of education, technomanagerialism fails to encourage the development of the person, their individual interests, skills, and preferences; it affords little

opportunity to explore their emotional life, values, or ethical beliefs, their prejudices and fears, or reflect upon and improve their social skills; it leaves no room for self-expression or creativity and suppresses critical thinking. Technomanagerialism provides little opportunity to participate face-to-face in an academic community in which a range of opinions can be openly explored and constructive relationships fostered. Although it makes some pretense at encouraging the creativity and critical thinking of staff and students, it does so only within parameters tied to predetermined and very precise assessment criteria and learning outcomes. It cannot foster a genuine spirit of inquiry, true critical thinking, or reflective practice, and therefore, it is not unreasonable to describe it, as Giroux and others have done, as "anti-academic."

A worrying consequence of this, particularly in the education of health care professionals, is that it creates a compliant workforce, unable to look beyond the status quo and unlikely to recognize let alone question and change inadequate or outmoded policies and practices. Graduates may be ill equipped to evaluate or introduce new ways of working, and lack the requisite interpersonal skills for effective and harmonious working relationships within complex and demanding health care systems. Fueled by a litany of systemic scandals and failures, from staff bullying to sexual harassment and assault and lethal patient neglect, widespread concern about the apparent lack of a moral compass at an individual and organizational level in health care settings will continue to be a familiar feature of health care. The disconnect between technical knowledge and reflective, values-driven professional practice can only deepen as a consequence of governmental commitment to neoliberal ideology and the anathema of technomanagerialist education toward critical emancipatory interests.

Furthermore, such a stultifying view of higher education revises public and professional beliefs about the role/functions of the university and of academics. The business model casts the university as a profit-making enterprise, in which its financial health becomes its paramount concern. A century ago, the French sociologist, Max Weber, conceived organizations that would be so concerned to meet technical rational demands that their energies would be directed at maintaining their own existence through self-surveillance rather than in the service of their original purpose. The business model university provides a contemporary example of an organization located well down the Weberian path. In an effort to balance its accounts while maintaining the quality of its graduates, generating acceptable performance indicators for Government, and retaining its position in international league tables, income generation becomes a major focus at all levels. Staffing levels are inevitably reduced in favor of technology-based mass education, and the burden on remaining staff is maximized. The new learning meshes neatly with the business model because it is concerned with quantity rather than quality, and maximum measurable output for the

least resource input is the order of the day. Technical vocational training becomes the dominant feature of the university, with humanities and nonscience-based disciplines marginalized. Technomanagerialism is then promoted as the “best fit” for such an institution, when in fact it is a natural consequence of governments’ sink-or-swim neoliberal ideology of self-funding and the minimal state. The claim that the new methods value self-direction and personal responsibility is at odds with the focus on instrumental knowledge, and the reality of standardization and strict regulation, and cannot be reconciled to the business model that sees students as relatively passive customers, purchasing both knowledge and the credibility assumed to attach to university education. Intellectual, ethical, and emotional development is irrelevant in such a model, where the touchstone of success is the ability to reproduce under examination conditions a prescribed data set (O’Brien, 2017). Students are effectively reduced to economic income units, and strategic planning in the neoliberal university occurs around projected income opportunities rather than social need, scholarly agendas, or the expertise and interests of its academic staff. It may thus be stretching a point to suggest that the neoliberal, technomanagerialist university provides anything deserving the name “education.”

Concluding Comments: Getting the Best Out of Technomanagerialism

Technomanagerialism looks well-entrenched in Australian universities, but it can be argued that its failings as a basis for educating a contemporary citizenry may cause its downfall. Half a century ago, the French socialist thinker Andre Gorz (1965), deploring the technicization of university education that he was witnessing, was nonetheless able to conjure an optimistic view of its future, based on what he thought was a set of fundamental anomalies in the process. First, the success of any society, including its industries and businesses, ultimately calls upon sets of skills that surpass those installed by a purely technical instrumental curriculum and the way of thinking that it generates. Some critics refer to neoliberal universities as pseudovocational, insofar as they prepare people inadequately through a restrictive curriculum and prepare them in any case for nonexistent jobs (Côté & Allahar, 2011). There is a level at which the need for critical and creative thinkers is acknowledged, even in the health care sector, and there have been—from time to time—calls for universities to foster these talents in nurses rather than simply teach clinical procedures and factual knowledge. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, nursing curricula grounded in critical social theory appeared in the late 1980s but did not survive the onslaught of pragmatist and neoliberal policy making during the 1990s (Nelson, 2012). Elsewhere, Hills and Watson (2011) in the United States and Morrall and Goodman (2013) and Dyson (2018) in the United Kingdom have made articulate calls for a critical or emancipatory nursing curriculum, but the cultural drift away

from liberal ideology and the increasing hegemony of the political right in the last few years appear to have further entrenched nurse education in traditional scientific instrumentalism. This is exemplified by the rise of competency-based nurse education and the concomitant decline in “critical, oppositional perspectives” (Foth & Holmes, 2017) as Western societies moved from the welfare state to advanced neoliberalism. Second, Gorz argues that students in universities inevitably become aware of unexplored bodies of learning and alternative ways of thinking; the fact that these are being by-passed by a narrow, industry-focused, technology-driven curriculum being taught (and role modeled) by academics (and increasing numbers of sessional staff) who lack either the courage, “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959/2000), or wherewithal to challenge the status quo will further evoke dissatisfaction and resistance. Indeed, a few courageous students may even attempt to draw on counterhegemonic arguments in their work, thereby potentially incurring academic penalties for stepping outside the narrow confines of their strictly regulated, preset learning objectives and assessment targets. Gorz argued that students would resent being denied a wider education and forced down strictly defined pathways and that they would find more-or-less subtle ways of resisting and undermining those pathways. Such resistance might be covertly expressed by students, for example, via anonymous, University-led feedback mechanisms that seek to quantify the student experience or overtly via social media or the collective, organized action of student union groups. Rarely, resistance may also be augmented by critically reflexive nurse academics who, as intellectual activists, engage in “critical transformative pedagogy with their students and communities” (Goodman & Grant, 2017, p. 55). In reality, however, it is unlikely that the majority of Australian higher education students will run the risk of forfeiting their university place to bring about a revolution in the sector. Academics are also unlikely to sacrifice their careers to that end, although they may exit the system or move from one university to another, or into a different sector entirely, in search of a more fulfilling work life (Barker, 2017).

If the nursing profession is genuinely committed to the well-being of people, it must ensure that the education of nurses goes beyond the narrow confines of a standardized, prescriptive training and accommodates opportunities to encourage creativity, insightfulness, and critical thinking. It must encourage nurses to step back from the received view, to recognize that it *is* a received view, and to utilize a range of insights, including those from the so-called soft sciences and humanities to cast a critical eye upon it, with a view to detecting its weaknesses and considering what benefits might flow from other perspectives. To that end, calls for increased interprofessional education within the nursing curriculum have been made over many years.

This would require a radical rethink about the structure of the nursing profession, and the way nurses are prepared for

their roles within increasingly technical and commodified health systems (Austin, 2007). Nursing urgently needs to explore how an increasingly technical education can be moderated by experiential and humanities-based dimensions and advocate for a more liberal education along the lines described by John Henry Newman (1873) in his classic work “The Idea of a University.” Close consideration of the Humboldtian model of higher education and the “Academic Bildung” of students (Solberg & Hansen, 2015) has particular salience here. These themes have been taken up by Rolfe (2015) who claims that nursing and nurse education are, like universities themselves, experiencing a “crisis of confidence,” especially in Britain following the release of the Francis Report into the Mid-Staffordshire scandal (Francis, 2013). Rolfe calls for the education and practice of nursing to focus upon a hermeneutic human science of caring rather than the current empirical social science paradigm. Nursing needs to revisit those dimensions and work out how they can become an influential component of the contemporary curriculum, sitting alongside the technical knowledge based dimensions that have forced them out. Otherwise, nursing and nurse education will continue to drift along without regard for the humanity of nurses and the people they care for. Continued commitment to a neoliberal business model within universities places financial considerations above professional standards by focusing upon the quantity of students admitted and graduated rather than their quality (Shields, Purcell, & Watson, 2011). In the clinical setting, patients become dehumanized as instrumental thinking places government and institutional targets ahead of the caring agenda of the nursing profession, but nurses are not equipped to think critically, challenge inappropriate practices or initiate change, or, indeed, to access and utilize the knowledge required for quality care (Perron & Rudge, 2016). Nurses themselves become dehumanized and unreasonable, unable to fulfill their ethical, professional, and legal responsibilities. One must question whether such factors are contributing to the malignant bullying culture that has developed within nursing and in health care organizations more generally (Berry, Gillespie, & Fisher, 2016). Accelerating nurse turnover rates in hospitals and continuing exit from the profession by disillusioned nurses, with falling standards of care and the likelihood of further Mid-Staffordshire style failures, are the most likely consequences. According to Rolfe, nurses in the Staffordshire hospital were let down “. . . in part by an education system that reflects larger technical rational approaches to care, and an education system that values, promulgates, and rewards rationality more than reason, technical knowledge more than human understanding, and training more than education” (Rolfe 2015, p. 151). In Australia, our way of preparing nurses is no different, and inevitably predisposes our health care system to equally dramatic failures. If, as a profession, we are genuinely committed to quality patient care, we would do well to reflect deeply upon these issues, and in particular, on how the necessary changes can

be brought about when nurse education and practice are located within the neoliberal structures of university and health care institutions respectively.

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