

Being and becoming an academic in the neoliberal university: a necessary conversation

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While numerous definitions exist, for us, the concept of a neoliberal university is useful shorthand for the idea of the university as a market-driven system, which employs modes of governance based on a corporate model. As early career academics (ECAs) functioning in and critical of this ‘market-driven system’, the rationale for producing and commissioning papers for this special issue was as much personal as it was motivated by a gap in the literature, although a lacuna certainly existed. We were keen to understand if and how our physical education and sport pedagogy (PESP) peers were ‘surviving’ or ‘thriving’ (O’Sullivan & Penney, 2014) in their neoliberal universities. Inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke’s (1984) timeless ‘Letters to a Young Poet’, and a timely invitation to consider how PESP ECAs might be better mentored, the decision to lead a project and a special issue focused on intergenerational dialogue in the field was made.

While we credit Rilke (1984), at least in part, for inspiring this special issue, we credit another poet—Evan Boland—for prompting us to title the special issue as we have. In her critical and personal essays on the journey, passion and struggle of becoming a woman poet, Boland (2011) makes a case for ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ being positioned in the ‘wrong order’, because disorder and confusion is, for her, a sustained and central feature of the construction of a poet’s identity. In our opinion, Boland’s observation also holds true for academics; there is nothing settled about an academic’s identity. The process of becoming an academic does not stop because the being has been achieved. This is, therefore, a special issue about being an academic and the protracted adventure of becoming one.

If poets provided the inspiration for ‘The Letters Project’ and the title for this special issue, it was novelists and memoirists that reminded us that if you look close enough, you will see history repeating itself. At just the right time, one of the professors in PESP suggested we read ‘Crossing to Safety’ (Stegner, 2007), a semi-autobiographical novel by ‘The Dean of Western Writers’ about two young couples who meet at the beginning of their academic careers in Madison, Wisconsin, during the Great Depression. This text prompted us, as undoubtedly was his intention, to be more circumspect

about the blame we lay at the feet of neoliberalism; by highlighting how many academics then, like academics now had precarious employment, battled over what was valued in their respective universities and fields, and at times felt isolated, exploited, underappreciated, insecure and so on.

However, while we have become necessarily cautious about drawing straight lines between dominant neoliberal ideologies and all of the trials and tribulations of being an academic, we remain committed to the utility of the concept of the neoliberal university. Firstly, because of its explanatory power; it captures so well the drivers and effects of relatively recent and significant transformations of the university. Secondly, because the concept of the neoliberal university is also productive and hopeful, in the sense that it implies that there are, have been and can be other kinds of university (Rustin, 2016). The concept gives those who care to do so, licence to imagine universities, fields and academic work in different ways. This special issue also, therefore, represents our modest effort to ignite and sustain critical conversation about alternative ways of being and becoming academics, and the ethical, intellectual, collegial and hopeful principles and strategies that might move us beyond the popular and often unproductive critiques of the neoliberal university.

In the first paper from ‘The Letters Project’, Laura Alfrey, Eimear Enright and Steven Rynne draw on the narratives of 30 ECAs to gain insight into the joys, challenges and ambitions they associate with being and becoming academics. Their findings suggest that many ECAs are experiencing crises of habitus as they work to suppress ethical dispositions and values and adjust to ‘the rules’ they are increasingly expected them to play by. They contend that it is together and in dialogue that academics can work to build and sustain modest, practical morals and protect and enable reflexive, collegial and ethical dispositions.

Drawing on professorial data from the same project, the paper by Eimear Enright, Steven Rynne and Laura Alfrey focuses on 11 professors’ responses to ECA narratives, and specifically on how the professors construct the university and PESP and the implications of these constructions for how they advise and mentor ECAs. They argue that while much of the professorial advice generated through the project might be interpreted as targeted towards the development of more accomplished neoliberal

subjects, there was some evidence of a more radical mentoring through advice that foregrounded strategies of resistance.

Catherine Hartung, Nicoli Barnes, Rosie Welch, Gabrielle O'Flynn, Jonnell Uptin and Samantha McMahon recruit 'collective biography'—a feminist poststructuralist research strategy—to capture and question what it means to be an academic in the precarious modern university. Their research is a 'resource of hope' (Kenway, Boden, & Fahey, 2014, p. 2); it moves beyond the popular neoliberal critique of the university, by providing a compelling case for, and example of, the construction of grounded, collegial, playful and caring academic identities.

Also, drawing on an evocative poststructuralist autoethnographic approach, Fiona McLachlan presents an account of being and becoming a critical scholar in a neoliberal context. For her, the relative security, privilege and opportunity of her permanent academic job have come with a heightened appreciation of the ethical obligations of being an academic. Fiona positions herself as an agent of change in, as well as the subject of the neoliberal regime. While very aware of the challenges of 'making changes from the inside', she advocates for academic identities and scholarship that are imbued with and emboldened by ethical imperatives.

Benjamin Williams, Erin Christensen and Joseph Occhino identify and critically engage with two prominent themes: 'making it big' and 'making it through' in the academy. They illustrate the utility of material-semiotics to scholars who are interested in academic identity, by recruiting a material-semiotic sensibility to reflect on their transitions from doctoral students to ECAs. They argue that 'making it' involves embracing tensions, imperfections and ambivalences and engaging in thoughtful, practical and collective tinkering and assembling of felicitous scholarly identities.

Dean Barker's paper, which again utilises an autoethnographic methodological approach, attends to the author's experience of being an 'early mid-career' academic. Dean employs Foucauldian notions of governmentality and care of the self to consider how he has become a neoliberal subject, while at the same time resisting technologies of power, and argues for greater discussion about the significance of local socio-political contexts in shaping PESP scholarly identities.

In the next paper, Ashley Casey and Tim Fletcher examine the challenges they faced as they progressed from beginning to mid-career, paying particular attention to the pressure to attract external funding. Through a self-study methodology, they detail the unanticipated personal and professional costs associated with the pursuit of grants and argue that academics, and indeed whole disciplines, are being stifled and undermined as fundability increasingly drives the kind of research that is undertaken.

Michalis Sylianou, Eimear Enright and Anna Hogan's research explores doctoral students' and early career researchers' experiences of learning to be researchers. They focus specifically on the facilitators and challenges of research training, and discuss both generic and PESP-specific research skills and dispositions. They argue for the ongoing support of global, online communities of PESP researchers that allow research education, training and scholarly inquiry to be undertaken in networked and generative ways.

Finally, Steven Rynne, Eimear Enright and Laura Alfrey's methodological paper demonstrates the steps and missteps they took with narrative, inquiry and the field as they worked to support intergenerational dialogue in PESP. They conclude that researching up and across within one's own field is always going to be a tricky process as it holds researchers accountable in ways that researching others does not; it forces you to seriously consider the personal risks and benefits associated with your inquiry.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue identify important questions about the possibility of constructing new and different academic identities that are carved and crafted not by market priorities but rather by sound ethics, intellectual curiosity and rigour, and care for ourselves, our colleagues, our students and our field of inquiry. These questions reach out for further analyses. We hope that this special issue makes a meaningful contribution to a necessary and sustained conversation about different ways of being and becoming an academic in the neoliberal university.