

# **Towards an economy of higher education**

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*This paper draws a distinction between ways thinking and acting, and hence of policy and practice in higher education, in terms of different kinds of economy: economies of exchange and economies of excess. Crucial features of economies of exchange are outlined and their presence in prevailing conceptions of teaching and learning is illustrated. These are contrasted with other possible forms of practice, which in turn bring to light the nature of an economy of excess. In more philosophical terms, and to expand on the picture, economies of excess are elaborated with reference, first, to the understanding of alterity in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and, second, to the idea of Dionysian intensity that is to be found in Nietzsche. In the light of critical comment on some current directions in policy and practice, the implications of these ways of thinking for the administrator, the teacher and the student in higher education are explored.*

The purpose of this paper is to assert a simple distinction, to show how this is manifested in higher education and then to examine ways in which a release from the hegemony of the dominant pole in this distinction opens the way to better practice in higher education. My concern is with different economies, though not primarily with economy in the familiar financial sense. It is with economies as ways of thinking and acting. My first task then is to identify a contrast within these.

## **Two economies**

There are many ways in which human relationships are properly understood in terms of exchange. You lend me ten pounds today, and I agree to pay it back tomorrow. I pay it back and the debt is settled. I invite you to give a lecture at my university on a particular occasion. Having accepted, you come along at the appointed time and present your lecture. You have fulfilled your commitment. I undertake to teach a particular class, which involves marking the essays the students write, being available to them during my 'office hours', attending the examiners' meeting, collecting course evaluation forms, and so on, and I do all this meticulously. At the end of the year my work is completed. You agree to sit on a committee on widening participation, turn up to its meetings having read the relevant papers, make appropriate contributions to discussion, and you have discharged your function. So too we might think of students, who enrol on a module, identify the assessment requirements, complete the necessary coursework assignments and revise sufficiently to answer the requisite number of questions in the examination, and satisfy expectations of attendance. They return their library books, and the course is completed, leaving them ready to

proceed to the next module. A compact with a school matches the opportunity of a place at university with the commitment to study, the school's preparation of nominated students with the university's preparedness to accept them. A contract with an employer matches investment in learning with the delivery of a course.

These are all forms of exchange in what we might think of as a closed economy, an economy that totalises the field of concern. They have their counterparts at the level of course design, lesson planning and teaching quality assessment. A course establishes clearly its aims and objectives, specified probably in terms of learning outcomes. Teaching is devised so that the most efficient means is taken to enabling students to achieve these outcomes. The process, ideally, is transparent to students so that they are encouraged to direct their efforts towards the most efficient ways of reaching these ends. They are encouraged perhaps to identify their own preferred learning styles so that none of the effort they put into the course is squandered. In fact nothing that happens in the classroom, or for that matter in other aspects of their study for this course, will be extraneous to these clearly specified purposes. Assessment is strictly geared to the learning outcomes, which place the emphasis heavily on skills, and students are tested against all of these. Quality assurance is facilitated by the fact that what the teachers and the learners are required to do will be fully specified; the success in achieving the course objectives is transparent to scrutiny, providing clear measures of performance and means of comparison with rival institutions.

That these are forms of exchange conditioned by a closed economy can be seen if we consider for a moment what they rule out. Let us begin by considering the perspective of the university lecturer. Suppose that in designing her course she has in mind a certain body of work that she wants to acquaint her students with – it might be a certain set of texts in a humanities subject, for example, or perhaps the possibilities of a particular range of techniques in art and design, or again some aspects of the principles of suspension bridge construction in civil engineering. She has, let us assume, some sense of the value and fascination of these things, whether they are vocationally useful or not: they are the occasion for the acquisition of knowledge on the part of students but also for the exercise of imaginative thought; and one of the reasons she teaches in a university is, after all, that she is enthusiastic about these things, or, if you like, has a love for her subject. She thinks it entirely reasonable that forms of assessment should be devised that fairly reflect the kinds of things that her students learn in the course of their study, seeing this as providing feedback to her students and recognition of their ability and achievement, indicators of this for potential employers, and evidence of the effects of her own teaching that may help her to adjust and improve it – indeed she sees assessment in some form or other as integral to teaching. What she does not accept is that assessment must be exhaustive: the presumption that the teaching and learning that takes place on the course can only be justified to the extent that it satisfies learning outcome requirements has the effect of stifling aspects of the course she is teaching that she sees as vital to its life. Indeed a further consequence

follows from this, so she believes: that those same learning outcomes are themselves likely to be less fully realised if they are not contextualised within the broader, more open-ended approach she favours.

From the perspective of the student a similar story can be told. Suppose that a student signs up for a module with some enthusiasm. The opening lecture is lively enough, and a visit to the library secures a small collection of the books and articles on the reading list. The student sets about reading these with some enthusiasm. Looking at the course guide, however, he finds that in order to satisfy the requirements of this module, he is required to complete two coursework essays, chosen from a list of ten items. On discussing the various options with other students, he finds out that several of them have sized up the situation and others are following suit: all you need to do is to read the books relevant to the topics you are going to write about; anything else is a waste, as it will take up time that could have been spent improving the essays you will be judged on. Once those essays are done, there is not really any point in going to the lectures any more; in fact, once you have general idea of what the topic is about, it probably makes sense to go only to the lectures that are directly about the topics you have chosen. Our conscientious student finds his enthusiasm somewhat dulled by this. He had been hoping that the course would open up new ways of thinking for him, and still, he supposes, it might, but there is a kind of inexorable logic about what the others say: they are perhaps just more pragmatic and realistic than he has been, and he does not want to make the mistake of spreading his efforts too thinly or of directing his energies inappropriately of getting too carried away with things so that he loses sight of what is required. When he sets about the writing of his assignments, however, once again he finds himself deflated. He reads the guidance about completing assignments in the course guide to find that what he has to do in order to achieve a particular grade is to meet the criteria that are set out there. The more wised-up students tell him he must give back to the lecturers the answers that they anticipate, which they will have carefully accentuated in their lectures; it is these that will tally with their marking schemes, and anything that he does beyond this, however brilliant this may be, is likely to fall through the system.

There is a crucial difference between the perspectives of teachers and students over this. Our university lecturer, we are imagining, has a robust sense of how things might be different. She may have gained this through her own experience of higher education, in less busy and quite possibly more privileged times. Or she may have caught some sense of what teaching and learning can be about from, for example, reading of the formative educational experiences of people she admires and who have influenced her, or perhaps her familiarity with particular kinds of literature. She may simply have a more intuitive grasp of these things, born perhaps of her fascination with the pursuit of her subject. There may be subject-specific qualities to the experience of teaching and learning that she has enjoyed – say, the thrill of carrying out a successful laboratory experiment, or perhaps the confidence gained as one begins tentatively to participate in its research seminars. Our student, in contrast, is as yet on the other side of this experience – that is, the outside of this subject, or of

this aspect of the subject. The person we have in mind – evidently more than the others who are taking this module – seems, on the face of it, to be receptive enough to the possibilities that the subject may open up. But he is also learning something of what education is about, and *a fortiori* what this subject is about, by the expectations that the course places on him and by the position that others – his fellow students *and his teachers* – occupy in relation to this. In a real sense he is learning what education amounts to. A further consideration is relevant here too. This is that there will be many new staff who, unlike the university lecturer we have been considering, are themselves still learning what higher education is about. Of course, they will have had their own experience as students, but when they find themselves faced with the anxious demands of quality assurance systems set up to ensure a more ‘professional’ approach to teaching, not to mention their own anxieties about establishing themselves as researchers, they are likely to be impressionable and to acquiesce all too uncritically in the economy of teaching and learning sketched above.

It is worth bringing a further player into the scene we have been developing, and this is the university administrator – the dean, the pro-vice-chancellor, the manager perhaps. With university funding increasingly affected by systems of quality control, it is incumbent upon the administrator to take all reasonable steps to try to gain good ratings. Achieving the best ratings is likely, as far as teaching and learning are concerned, to require not so much excellence as a vigilance against slip-ups, and a judicious containment of risk. Vision in the manager will be welcomed, but this will need to be formulated in the university’s mission statement, and evidenced in the measures of good practice against which its credibility will be judged. In other words it will be subject to the same closed economy. The manager whose vision genuinely exceeds these terms will probably recognise that she needs to ‘play the system’, which is hardly likely to do anything other than compromise and distort whatever it is she intends.

Some five decades ago the playwright John Osborne, despairing of the moribund state into which British theatre had lapsed in the post-War years, wrote satirically of what he called ‘the well-made play’: the curtains are drawn upon the scene of an Edwardian drawing room, a telephone rings, the butler enters and answers. . . . The creaking exposition and formulaic plot are safely underway. And although the audience may be satisfied enough, the effects are ultimately soporific. In certain respects the closed economy of teaching and learning is to be found in ‘the well-made lesson’, with its symmetry of objectives and method. The ‘well-run university’, quality assured, replicates this through the institution as a whole. In the ‘well-run virtual university’ this tidy economy of teaching and learning dovetails perfectly with the databases and spreadsheets of ICT.

I have established this distinction in a way that reveals where my sympathies lie. I make no apologies about this on the grounds that to see the distinction is, I believe, necessarily to understand the shortcomings of the closed economy. The problem is precisely that many people cannot think outside these terms. There is something curiously self-reinforcing, self-perpetuating and, for

some, seductive about this entire way of thinking. To justify claims, or at least to render it more plausible, I need now to look at more philosophical ways in which this distinction has been elaborated.

### **Beyond the economy of exchange and satisfaction**

A valuable lead into this is provided if we take what may seem to be a step away from the matter at hand and turn to an aspect of the question of exchange that has preoccupied a number of thinkers over the past century and that has been especially prominent in poststructuralist philosophy: the idea of the gift. The paradox of the gift has to do with the various ways in which gift-giving seems itself to slide into a kind of exchange. This is most obviously the case with the reciprocal giving of presents, of course; the point is driven home when one remembers the protocols of pricing what one gives according to the relationship to the person, and according to the probable cost of what one is to receive in return! But where giving is not reciprocated in this way, there are other forms of reward or recompense: the gratitude of the recipient, delight in the pleasure that one has given. Even where the donation is anonymous, the giver is prone to a kind of satisfaction, if not to a kind of hubris, in having done good. In short, the pure gift, untainted by these factors comes to seem an impossibility, and hence the paradox of giving: a gift is not a (pure) gift, and yet giving is not something we should give up on but something we should aspire to do. It is in relation to this impossibility of giving that giving is given its sense. We should live conscientiously with its impossibility – still endeavouring, that is, to give - for to give up on this is to acquiesce or subside into mere exchange. It is the very fact that we do not lose sight of this impossibility that saves us from that closed economy. Teaching and learning, as our opening distinction perhaps begins to suggest, and as we shall further see below, can fruitfully be understood in terms of this impossibility.<sup>1</sup> We might think of this as redolent of a kind of perfectionism, where the sanguine recognition of the impossibility of the perfectibility of our actual circumstances does not dull the sense of a perfection to which we should aspire.

In a more philosophical idiom, a broader and more culturally pervasive basis for the position I am developing here can be provided if we turn to a distinction drawn by Emmanuel Levinas. In a 1957 essay, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', he identifies two directions that the philosophical spirit can take. This requires us to imagine two ways of thinking in and of doing philosophy, but also by implication two kinds of orientation towards life. In the first the thinker maintains, Levinas explains, a relation distinct from him, other than him. It involves a movement that must lead us beyond the nature that surrounds us and towards a beyond: it goes towards the stranger, and extends in a kind of perfectionism towards the divine. This is heteronomy itself. Levinas identifies this thinking in terms of a relation to infinity. In the second, the thinker freely assents to propositions that are then incorporated in such a way that his nature is preserved: it thereby brings into the same what was other. It moves towards a kind of autonomy in which nothing irreducible would limit

thought. Disparate and diverse events are incorporated into a history; this might be seen as ‘the conquest of being by man over the course of history’.<sup>2</sup> This is a thinking in terms of totality.

It is the distinction between totality and infinity, of course, that becomes the guiding idea in his major work of that name.<sup>3</sup> Crucial to this book is Levinas’s abiding preoccupation with questions of alterity, and in the course of it he develops the ethical distinction between the relation to others and the relation to the Other. The latter is usually marked by an initial capital to indicate an absolute relation to the other person, independent of particular characteristics, of factors that might differentiate this person from that person. Of course, there are ethical questions that relate to such differentiating factors – questions of social justice (say, to do with race or disability or the distribution of wealth between social classes), of obligations relating to specific roles or situations, and so on. But these operate on what might be thought of as a horizontal axis. Quasi-contractual in nature, they are understood as part of an economy of exchange, and rightly so. One can discharge one’s obligations, satisfy needs, settle one’s debts, etc., in such a closed economy, and this is an economy that can be totalised or regarded comprehensively.

Thinking in terms of exchange is then inevitably and desirably a part of our ordinary lives, but it can also encroach on them too much and take on distorted forms. The effects of this are to deny a more fundamental relation, on what might be thought of as a vertical axis, the economy of which is, as it were, scandalous to modern thought - to ways of thinking characterised by exchange. The vertical is the vertiginous dimension of an obligation that deepens the more I answer to it, where I am singularised in this responsibility.

Some further examples may help to illustrate the consequences of this denial. Think first of the responsible parent who, having paid for the good school, bought clothing of decent quality, and provided nourishing food, feels that she has fully discharged her obligations. Imagine the dutiful citizen who, having paid her taxes, voted whenever required and never broken the law, is satisfied that she has acquitted herself in a responsible way, that she is a decent citizen. So too, we can imagine the diligent teacher whose class has been assiduously prepared for their Standard Achievement Tests, who now goes home content that she has done her job efficiently and effectively. Star professors in universities, notching up the esteem indicators of citations, research grants, keynotes and appearances on TV in preparation for the forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise, take smug satisfaction in the stars they gain. And the wisened-up student who, identifying the performance criteria, has picked off her assignments, meeting their requirements in full is ready to close her books on this module and this course, the latest addition to her learning portfolio. But we can imagine, can we not, also that each of these might become moral grotesques, whose characteristic vice is perhaps hubris? Is there not something virtuous about the parent (the parent, the citizen, the teacher, the lover . . .) who feels that she has never done enough, who has some sense of the infinite possibilities of her relation to the other. Is not the person who does not see things like this in danger of getting *the whole thing* wrong – and precisely

missing the point of citizenship, parenthood, love or education? Is there not something morally repugnant about the parent who thinks she has done enough? Might we not expect a lover of learning to exceed the currency of star ratings and CVs? Recognising this opens the way perhaps to thinking further of what this absolute relation to the Other might mean for higher education.

## **Alterity**

It is important to realise that Levinas's account of the relation to the Other involves something other than the terms of Martin Buber's *I-thou* relation. The relation, first, is not symmetrical. The first person usage, as both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein had both earlier emphasised, is crucial in ethics, such that 'I am responsible to you' is not to be understood to imply an equivalent responsibility on your part, or on his or hers. The relation is something that singularises me: my absolute obligation to the Other is not something that I can pass up or pass on. Levinas quotes Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov: 'Everyone is guilty, but I am more guilty than the others.' This breaks loose, it should be clear, from any economy of mutuality or reciprocation. The relation, second, is not one of cognition, and hence not one of recognition. The Other comes to me as having depths that I cannot know, and in order not to do violence I must acknowledge this unknowability, a negativity at the heart of things. This is the ethical relation *par excellence*. In contrast to the totalities or closed economies of the horizontal axis, this (vertical) axis points to infinity. Of critical importance, for Levinas, is the fact that, if this fundamental relation to the Other is overridden, the relations to others on the horizontal plane will also be corrupted. Quasi-contractual obligations, etc., are not understood correctly if the economies within which they operate are not ultimately given their sense by the different terms of this infinite relation – hence the poverty of the self-satisfied citizen, parent, teacher or lover. A student, let us remember, is originally a lover (Latin, *studere* – to love).

It is fairly common ground amongst readers of Levinas that the Other is to be understood in human terms – that is, as a human being. But there is a danger in putting the emphasis on the human being in this way in that the human comes to be understood in terms of the personal. Where the personal is construed as appertaining to this particular person with this person's distinguishing characteristics, or, say, to this particular oppressed group with its defining characteristics, this is a further distortion. It is to miss the permeation of experience by the relation to the human, however much this may be hidden or denied – a permeation in ways that go beyond, and are qualitatively different from, what we might think of as the personal or as matters of interpersonal relations. One consequence of this is that certain aspects of the educational purchase of Levinas's account are lost. Let us pause for a moment over a series of remarks from *Totality and Infinity* in which the complex interconnections of teaching, language and alterity may become evident:

The presence of the Other, or expression, source of all signification, is

not contemplated as an intelligible essence, but is heard as language, and thereby is effectuated exteriorly.<sup>4</sup>

Language *effectuates* the entry of things into a new ether in which they receive a name and become concepts. . . The analyses of language that tend to present it as one meaningful action among others fail to recognize this *offering* of the world, this offering of contents which answers to the face of the Other or which questions him, and first opens the perspective of the meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

The voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. . . [The Other's] alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.<sup>6</sup>

The relation to the Other is definitely not to be captured in those rare moments of intimacy when one gazes into the depths of someone's eyes. In contrast, we see here Levinas's emphasis on the fact that the Other is heard as language, that language constitutes the very opening of the perspective of the meaningful, and that this offering of language, this voice, teaches in such a way as to breach the circle of exchange. Levinas says sometimes that the relation to the Other is very rare: but it is rare not in the manner of 'peak experiences' but rare in that we rarely live up to its demands; it is through forms of denial that we hide its subtending of our lives.

What is taught, in higher education especially, should not be conceived in terms of banks of knowledge or transferable skills or competences of whatever kind. Michael Oakeshott was closer to the mark when he spoke of learning a subject as the initiation into a conversation, a conversation of which we are the inheritors:

Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human utterance.<sup>7</sup>

In fact subjects of study can never be rightly understood as brute facts about the world or as free-floating skills: they are always in some sense linguistically constituted practices. Indeed what other kinds of practice can there be? And they are no less substantial for this. Does not this 'conversation' underline the nature of curriculum as language?

Hence, however much our economies of teaching and learning may hide this fact, the subjects of the curriculum constitute an offering of language that,



by its very nature, breaches those forms of closure. And our choice – in what we teach and how we teach it, in what we study and how this is pursued, and in the manner in which all this is assessed – comes down to an acquiescence in forms of denial and an openness to the infinite possibilities that education otherwise occasions. That there are practical implications here, not only for the education of students but for the improvement of teaching and research, can scarcely be in doubt.

The account of alterity in Levinas's thought enables, further, the realisation in teaching and learning of a kind of objectivity in which we are freed from what Iris Murdoch called the 'anxious avaricious tentacles of the self'. In this, as we have begun to see, ideas of responsibility can come to be understood not only as involving personal relationships but as extending to a responsiveness and answerability to the objects of study, to the content of learning, to the subjects to which we are subject. Rather than a body of knowledge or skills to be mastered, a subject of study comes to be understood as deepening and expanding the more one pursues it: as with the vista that extends as one ascends the mountainside, one progresses towards a greater understanding of what there is still to learn. From outside one scarcely understands the problems. There is nothing fanciful about this: this is the familiar experience of people who love their subjects; and against it so many aspects of current policy and practice, and of the prevailing discourse of teaching, learning and research methods, look palely narcissistic. But the very possibility of expressing this is surreptitiously excised by that discourse. There is a danger that the possibility of thinking this will be lost too.

The contrast between totality and infinity provides one way of recognising an orientation to education that exceeds the closed economy of teaching and learning. With its stress on alterity and responsibility, it is characterised by a kind of orientation towards service, in which the teacher and the student are in service of the subject, and in which one models this for the other. It is important to realise, however, that there are other economies of excess that similarly breach the cramped terms of the understanding of learning and teaching sketched at the start. In order to see something of the possibilities here, we need to turn away from relations of alterity and towards another kind of overcoming of the self – this time not in subordination to the Other but in the experience of flow and intensity. This is once again to escape our anti-educative impulses towards various forms of self-absorption.

## **Intensity**

The economy of excess we have been considering is characterised by an obligation or responsibility that deepens the more you answer to it. In what follows excess functions through desire. But unlike the classical understanding of desire as correlative to lack, and hence as in principle satisfiable, this is a desire that intensifies the more it is pursued. The guiding thoughts here are Nietzsche's.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first revaluation of all values, Nietzsche draws a distinction between the Dionysian forces of Ancient Greek tragedy and the Apollonian form and clarity of Socratic dialectic. The former is characterised by surging energy unleashed in anarchic ways, impulse alike to creativity and destruction; the latter by pure form and the ordering of logical thought and faith in reason. With the advent of Socrates, or to be more precise, of a certain ‘Socratism’ – which is neither the position of the historical Socrates nor that revealed in Plato’s account – the possibility of bearing witness in the manner of tragic drama is eroded, and the lives we live become thinner as a result. There is an optimism to the arguments and counter-arguments of the dialectic, a faith in the progress of reasoned enquiry, that progressively invades tragedy and forces ‘its death-leap into bourgeois theatre’.<sup>8</sup>

The product of this Socratism in the modern age is ‘abstract man’ – ‘abstract education, abstract morality, abstract justice, the abstract state’.<sup>9</sup> If we transpose this to conditions of postmodernity, we find that ‘abstract education’ is further refined in the proceduralism, coding and performativity of higher education.<sup>10</sup> Instrumental reason and managerialism, as it were, stage-manage the curriculum in what have become its rituals of presentation, communication, assessment and accounting. The ideal product of such an education is a being with a portfolio of transferable skills, a being with a set of masks to put on, appropriately listed in a record of achievement and instantly recognisable to employers. The optimism of the beliefs that for every problem there is an appropriate technical solution, that human knowledge accumulates without limit, that understanding is possible only where things are fully available to scrutiny has as a correlate a kind of plundering and display of other cultures – as theme parks and the heritage industry suggest, and as the burgeoning of the virtual world reveals. Multiculturalism is thematised as a series of spectacles, foreign travel a collection of packaged experiences. Modern epistemology grasps knowledge, containing it in the concept, so that the knowledge economy can then turn it into a commodity fit for exchange. Criticism is the business of the student’s crib, of book reviews in the Sunday papers, and of late night television arts magazines. The plundering and display divert attention from the vacuousness of the culture in which such ideas thrive, a vacuousness for which psychotherapy and New Age spirituality are scant compensation. Hence, the economy of exchange in education – that is, in ‘the well-run university’ - involves a ‘bourgeois’ theatricalisation of standards, quality and excellence. Practice becomes contrived and self-conscious, staged and presented as the object of accountability’s gaze. The words ‘learning’ and ‘education’ are uttered with thespian gravitas.

While, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche already asserts that ‘Everything that we now call culture, education and civilization will one day appear before that infallible judge, Dionysos’<sup>11</sup>, in later work the conviction becomes still stronger, with the emphasis less on sublime recognition and on a balancing of forces and more on the affirmation of life in the upsurge of energy and passionate absorption. The bourgeois denial of these Dionysian energies brings with it *ressentiment* – feeling that is, as it were, turned back upon itself.

Such a description might fit the restrictive and debilitating machinery of accountability and the conception of teaching and learning that are at issue in this essay.

But if this is the force of the negative charge, what of a more positive nature might these thoughts imply? In what ways in higher education might there be found the desire that intensifies the more it is pursued? The Dionysian can break through in multiple and subtle ways. To show how this is so, let me appeal, more prosaically, so it may seem, to certain still familiar aspects of the experience of teaching and learning.

The experience of writing an essay begins for many students with procrastination, avoidance and hesitation. Perhaps a plan is sketched, then modified, then abandoned. A few desultory sentences are typed up, but the work is avoided until another day. At one sitting, however, there comes a point where the words start to flow, and the student, almost in spite of herself, so it seems, suddenly finds that an hour has gone past while she has been writing, an hour not noticed, and that she is in the thick of the argument. Forgetting the time and the multiple distractions, she is now intent on carrying on. She finds herself preoccupied with this work and eager to get back to it when she is away, and for a while, at least, this intensity is sustained. In the best case, the one we are most concerned with, this will not result only in a satisfaction at having completed, say, the requirements for this module but in a kind of exuberance that gives her a desire for more. In a similar vein, we can imagine the researcher struggling with the lows and highs of progress on a different time-scale, perhaps over the course of an entire career. Sometimes, to be sure, the work will falter, and sometimes there will be despair, but it is in the context of this dynamic engagement that the Dionysian breaks through, carrying her forward, intensifying her commitment.

The recurrent motif for this Dionysian intensity is the whirl of the ring of dancers – Matisse's *La Danse* captures just this. Who can tell the dancer from the dance? But, as these examples begin to show, energy and intensity can pulse also through quiet and solitary experience: fascination of the engineer with the machine's precision, contemplation of the work of art, puzzlement over a mathematical equation, peculiar turbulence excited by a philosophical problem—all are typified by this intense absorption.

It is also a part of the experience of teaching and learning. Many will remember the teachers who have influenced them most not in terms of, let us say, their efficiency in meeting the objectives of the course (though this is not to deny gratitude to teachers who get us through examinations) but through the way they drew their students into their enthusiasm, so that the students came to share that enthusiasm. In contrast to the Socratism that Nietzsche condemns, and quite unlike modern notions of 'Socratic method', this is the stuff of Plato's dialogues. So too most teachers, in universities and beyond, will have had some experience of classes that have 'gone well' – that is to say, where the experience of the class in some way or other, and perhaps unforeseeably, picked up speed. Maybe this was a carefully planned class where the material in question was handled adroitly by the teacher so that its intrinsic power absorbed the students.

Maybe it was a class that took an unpredictable turn, but where success depended crucially on the teacher's sense that this was the remark to pick up on, this the chance to pursue. Such occasions may have involved excited discussion in a seminar or concentrated work on a group project or perhaps discoveries on the World Wide Web. But it may also occur in the lecture-room, where only the lecturer is speaking and where the students are listening in silence and rapt attention. What these occasions have in common is an intense engagement with what is studied, where the students are drawn into this through the work of the teacher. Sometimes this results from the teacher's charisma or flamboyant style, sometimes from a more measured restraint or withdrawal, sometimes from provocation, and sometimes from allowing the work in question to speak for itself. The good teacher comes in a variety of forms. And there can be no recipe, for so much depends upon the teacher's judgement: in interacting with the class, in constructing and delivering the lecture, in responding to the rhythms of the occasion. . . . So much depends upon good timing. The teacher must be a sensitive conductor of the intensity generated in the friction of engagement with what is taught. There is no single way in which this is done well. Thus, instead of a set of predetermined skills or competences that can be prescribed, good teaching requires something more like Aristotelian practical reason - doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right circumstances, where the good teacher is in part the orchestrator of these circumstances – but also something less centred, more exposed and perhaps more vulnerable, more open to the event. There is no recipe, but this does not mean that, for the aspiring or practicing teacher nothing can be learned: such abilities are gained through attending to examples of good practice and through readiness to learn from these. They can be fostered also by attending to precisely the account that is presented here and to the way that it challenges easier assumptions about teaching and learning.

A further avenue to understanding what is at stake here is to be found in Gordon Bearn's outstanding essay 'Pointlessness and the University of Beauty', which vividly and imaginatively conveys the possibilities of these intensities of experience.<sup>12</sup> Following fault-lines in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, which in some ways reflect the distinction drawn here between intensity and alterity, Bearn entertains the idea of the University of Beauty, to be imagined as contrasting with the University of the Sublime.

Bearn's exploitation of the classic contrast between the beautiful and the sublime serves to turn the attention to questions of intensity and rhythm. In a flagrant violation of the principles of 'outcomes based education', beauty becomes linked to an ideal of *pointlessness*. On the strength of this, intensity is to be achievable via two routes. It can come most obviously through the kind of *subtraction* or lack of connection that is involved in concentration – as perhaps in absorption in a problem in pure mathematics. But it can also occur through something like *addition* where the object of the study is connected in countless ways, and where, in contrast to representational thinking with its positive and negative terms, thought flows in affirmation as along a Moebius strip, with no other side:

Formlessness and pointlessness move us in this direction not towards emptiness, but towards a beautiful intensity. This is what the other side of representation is: swarms of differences, swarms of intensities, a world without identity. And in its pointlessness, beauty will recover its autonomy, but this time, not by negation. This time beauty's autonomy derives not from its lack of connection, but from the myriad lines connecting it from here to everywhere.<sup>13</sup>

Our representational practices and genres of discourse regiment and stifle this intensity, staging it and stopping its flows. Beautiful intensity, in contrast, is to be imagined in terms of the intersecting lines of a multi-dimensional graph, the lines pulling their intersections along multiple dimensions. Bearn pictures Leonardo's studies of water, vortices, and deluges, in one of which

water from a single source pours into a turbulent pool producing a swarm of swirls ejecting flows in all directions . . . We can imagine maximally intense activities in terms of water pouring in from all directions producing swarms of almost Cartesian vortices, then ejecting flows in all directions, to begin the cycle again. The University of Beauty is dedicated to the cause of releasing the lines of that intense graph, the powerful turbulent flows which Leonardo depicts, sometimes even breaking apart mountains. . .<sup>14</sup>

Within such a vision, study comes to be characterised in terms of intense fascination in the work at hand. This disrupts, indeed renders ridiculous, any attempt tidily and exhaustively to specify learning outcomes or curricular objectives. It exposes the poverty of the way that ICT in education has, contrary to its richer possibilities, tended to be understood – in effect as canned learning accessed by information skills. One can anticipate any number of 'practical' objections here. But what is so valuable is the finding of a language for that beautiful intensity that might be the quality of university study.

It is important that the kind of beauty that is at issue here is found across the range of academic engagement. For the argument bypasses the hackneyed dichotomies of liberal and vocational education, and of intrinsic and extrinsic value. Vocational education inevitably involves theory, practice, pleasure and function. In the building of a bridge or road connecting two communities, for example, there is a site of investigation that can be approached from multiple points of view: population flows, concrete chemistry, the aesthetics and physics of bridge design, costs to the communities and the social change it effects.

It is simply a matter of not hiding this multiplicity of purposes behind the desire to seem either gruff and practical or sophisticated and theoretical. Unveiled, this multiplicity is a fine example of positive pointlessness, of beauty. Pointlessness is not to be restricted to the humanities, generalized or otherwise, it is the key to progress and excitement in every field.<sup>15</sup>

Over the course of a life the importance of technical training fades while that of an inventive imagination increases. It is then our duty to encourage ‘those features of higher education (in whatever field) that ignite the fires of the imagination’, that burn with a fire that does not consume.<sup>16</sup> Positive pointlessness, in any field, may be the secret to intensifying that imagination.

Ironically perhaps, there are signs of a libidinal charge in the closed economy that I have criticised – in its fetishisation of performance measures and in what has become its oppressive managerialism. And, ironically again, attempts to rehumanise the system by putting the learner at its heart reinforce precisely the self-absorption that is a barrier to the attention and objectivity I have advocated; they risk subsiding into a subjective indulgence, which is ultimately nihilistic. That these are correlates of a *ressentiment* that, in denying the good of education, suppresses and perverts its quality now becomes all the more plain to see.

### **Changing education**

The point is not simply to dispense with relationships of exchange in education, absurd as this would indeed be. The point is to understand what happens when they obscure these deeper considerations, and to counteract the effects of this. It is when they are conditioned by the economies of excess delineated here that relationships of exchange can function well.

There is no doubting the change that higher education has undergone in recent decades in many countries. Where this has been marked by widening participation, this is in many respects to be welcomed. Policy and practice in relation to this, in the UK especially, has been marked by two significant trends. The first of these is to be seen in the adoption of practices emanating from the further education sector, a sector more used to operating in this wider and typically more customer-orientated market. Universities have imported in a largely uncritical manner the managerial practices of that sector, honed as these have been on the managerialism of the past two decades. Yet they have largely ignored its success in reaching out to this wider range of students through the manner of its teaching. Some of the best practices I have described have been no less evident in that less high-profile sector.

The second concerns the ways in which many have seen ICT as the solution to the pressures of a mass system, with the major shift in the construction and patterns of delivery of the curriculum that this requires. This tends to be accompanied by blithe assumptions, to the neglect of evidence to the contrary, about the cost-effectiveness of ICT– assumptions that open the door wider to the adoption of precisely the canned learning criticised above. There are multiple and divergent possibilities within ICT, and these need to be assessed with far more subtlety and care if it is to play the beneficial part in higher education that it promises to do. A broad contrast can be drawn, however, that is relevant to the understanding of the current direction of policy

and practice. On the one hand, ICT has unparalleled potential for the storage and dissemination of information, whether through CD Rom technology or as online resources, and in this respect it models one aspect of the 'knowledge economy'; but against this there is its tendency to play into naïve assumptions about teaching and learning, reinforcing understandings of knowledge as uniformly structured and more or less inert objects of consumption, and hence contributing to its commodification. On the other, the growth of the Internet has revealed new possibilities of communication and interaction, modelling in the process lateral and decentred networks of connection, indicative of a further aspect of the knowledge economy; but the negative side of this is the lack of order and control, epitomised by the chaotic nature of the World Wide Web.

The divergence of these aspects of ICT in some ways symbolises, and may perhaps partly be the cause of, the current direction of higher education and a growing crisis in its self-understanding. This is most evident in its management and administration, but there are repercussions throughout the field of its operation, most importantly in teaching and learning. On the one hand, the virtues of networked activity and freedom of operation are extolled while, on the other, largely through the mechanism of funding, the centralising structures of bureaucratic control are reinforced. These are instabilities in relationships of exchange, and they are plainly not peculiar to any institution but endemic in the system. So long as thinking about higher education is confined with the economy of exchange, and hence so long as the understanding of what it is to teach and learn in a university is impoverished in this way, the confusion here is unlikely to be overcome.

The necessary reorientation of higher education will not be achieved without a better understanding of the nature of teaching and learning that is appropriate to it, and it is this that I have sought to provide. Against those who would rather be 'gruff and practical' and against those who believe we need a newly sophisticated theorisation of teaching and learning, the appeal here is to the kind of experience of higher education that many readers of this journal are likely to have had. While the prevailing conditions in the sector weigh against the approaches I have advocated, it is, of course, not the case that those working in universities merely acquiesce. Teachers have commonly been known to subvert the system, and university lecturers are in a stronger position to do this than many others. But, given the account I have provided, it is important to say just what academics should be doing. Let me conclude with some suggestions.

In the first place, there are implications for what is taught. The content of the curriculum should not be conceived as packages of information or finite bodies of knowledge, but always as opening up infinite possibilities for further enquiry. This will have an immediate practical effect on the topics, texts, problems that are chosen for the syllabus. Texts that are addressed should be such as to resist univocal reading; they should always be capable of unsettling the student and provoking further thought. The manner of teaching itself – its method, if you like – should seek to open these possibilities of thought, in ways that are not always foreseeable. Hence while it is appropriate to plan what one is going to teach, this goes hand-in-hand with the readiness to respond to the

context of the particular class and a willingness develop the lesson according to the occasion. This does not rule out commitment to broad aims; it is a condition of properly honouring them. It follows also that assessment should be devised in such a way as to leave scope to the student's developing thought. Far from being a soft option, this means keeping open throughout the course the demands that are made on students. For most courses it will also mean not attempting to specify in exhaustive detail the criteria for success. For some university teachers this may require thinking again about what 'criteria' and 'standards' properly mean, unlearning in the process the sense these terms have been given by regimes of performativity, and realising in the process the importance of traditions of enquiry and communities of scholarship in their being upheld and sustained. It follows furthermore that, in the manner in which they conceive of and undertake their own research, academics should be exemplars of the kinds of enthusiasm and commitment that I have attempted to describe.

Above all it is important to remember and resist the tendency of economies of exchange to colonise our thinking at all levels, and so to continue one's work, as a teacher, a researcher or an administrator, in an understanding of the economies of excess that properly characterise the quality of higher education. There is much here that can be done within the present system. There is also strong evidence for ways in which it can be improved.

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## **Notes**



- <sup>1</sup> See also the chapter entitled 'Giving Someone a Lesson' in Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish, *Thinking Again: Education After Postmodernism* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing, 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 48.
- <sup>3</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Oakeshott, 'Education: The Engagement and its Frustration', in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. T. Fuller (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989).
- <sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. S. Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.
- <sup>10</sup> For a fuller account, especially regarding the dominance of procedure over substance in higher education, see Paul Standish, 'Disciplining the Profession: Subjects Subject to Procedure', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 34.1, 2001, 5-23.
- <sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 95.
- <sup>12</sup> Gordon C.F. Bearn, 'Pointlessness and the University of Beauty', in *Lyotard: Just Education*, eds P. Dhillon and P. Standish (London, Routledge), 230-258.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.