Pedagogical Peculiarities
Conversations at the Edge of University Teaching and Learning
Emma Medland, Richard Watermeyer, Anesa Hosein, Ian M. Kinchin and Simon Lygo-Baker (Eds.)

Pedagogical Peculiarities: Conversations at the edge of university teaching and learning explores the peculiarities characterising university teaching cultures through a consideration of the implications, tensions and impacts associated with academic development in higher education. This is achieved through a series of deliberative dialogues, involving experts in pedagogy and academics working within specific disciplinary and institutional contexts. The chapters provide an important and currently missing critique of the peculiarity of teaching practice and the idealisation of teaching excellence in higher education. As a result, the volume’s major contribution lies in the advancement of a unique discourse of pedagogy in higher education, comprised of multiple contexts.

Ultimately, Pedagogical Peculiarities’ distinctiveness lies in its articulation of different pedagogical identities. These emanate from, and are characterised by, different teaching and learning environments, across different institutions and sectors. This, in turn, serves to illuminate the current contexts and challenges across higher education as they relate and respond to ideology, values, policy and changes in the organisation of the sector. In essence, Pedagogical Peculiarities explores what it means to be a contemporary academic.

“Pedagogical Peculiarities is a thoroughly engaging book about the complexities of teaching in higher education today. The contributors reject the mantras of best practice and the market in putting together a stimulating series of reflections on what it really means to manage the challenges of working in the modern university.”
– Bruce Macfarlane, University of Southampton, UK

“At a time when metrics are in the ascendency, this book provides a welcome interjection, offering a collection of unhurried and theoretically-rich narrative accounts that explore the distinctiveness of higher education pedagogy. Focusing on often overlooked areas of the academy such as veterinary medicine, performing arts or the ‘small discipline’ of medical physics, we gain access to a richer understanding of university teaching and teachers that is both intriguing and provocative.”
– Saranne Weller, London South Bank University, UK
CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE FUTURE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Volume 13

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Pedagogical Peculiarities

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BRILL
SENSE
LEIDEN | BOSTON
To the memory of
Joanne Heywood
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This book is published at a time when higher education is in a state of flux. Over the course of a decade we have seen the peculiar challenges of massification, internationalisation, and an increasingly diverse body of students and teachers. Higher education researchers like Rajani Naidoo (e.g. 2016) and Philip Altbach (e.g. 2016), point to how factors of globalisation and internationalisation have placed significant challenges to how the academic community responds to an ever diversifying student population. With an international, socially and culturally diverse student and teaching body, there emerges an array of requirements and challenges that need to be understood and addressed. These are grounded in the increased marketization and bureaucracy that characterises contemporary higher education. As a result, higher education has perhaps become more risk-averse as the student voice gains greater authority. Universities have become distracted by league tables and appear increasingly nervous of new forms of performance regulation that will label academics as excellent teachers, or not.

However, teaching is just one element of the professional role that characterises the traditional academic, the other substantive components of which are research and administration. Within this tripartite structure of the role, academics are seen to gravitate towards just one or other of these as a preferred activity, highlighting what Macfarlane (2011) refers to as the ‘unbundling’ of the academic role. Consequently, talk centres on academics as effective teachers, or excellent researchers, or successful managers. Far less often it seems, do we think of academics as a coherent combination of all three. This is the consequence of an ideologically-informed values system in higher education that places research at the pinnacle of professional esteem and status, followed, arguably not too far behind by administration as another route to institutional power and authority. Lagging in third, lies teaching; rather less well thought of, though still seen as important. ‘Teacher-bashing’ has been recognised as a ‘popular sport’ for some time (Palmer, 1998: 3), being fuelled by the pressures created by the current consumerist view of higher education. Nevertheless, teaching is also a form of activity from which, ironically, the university in many national contexts achieves its major form of funding and, therefore, sustainability.

In an attempt to create greater balance between research and teaching, a spotlight on teaching excellence in higher education has resulted in the proliferation of academic developers recruited by universities to support and encourage the pedagogical enhancement of academic staff (Gibbs, 2013). This has been accompanied by the recognition and reward of teaching excellence through the award of fellowship by professional bodies, such as the UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA), which provides benchmark accreditation that has increasingly become a requirement of
academic appointment. However, a spotlight on teaching excellence implies that there is a single ultimate target to reach for, which raises significant questions as to what is understood by teaching quality in a sector that is renowned and revered for its autonomy and diversity.

**Pedagogical Peculiarities**

Set within this context are higher education institutions that are peculiar places of teaching and learning. This peculiarity emerges from the idiosyncrasies that are inherent in the way higher education is both conceptualised and organised. The peculiarity of pedagogy in higher education is apparent in the way different disciplines are characterised by different kinds of spaces and different approaches to teaching and learning, or signature pedagogies as Shulman (2006) describes them. For instance, a pedagogy of performance followed in the training of actors or singers in post-compulsory settings is very different from the kinds of pedagogy we tend to associate with teaching and learning in the social sciences, which in turn differ from the kinds of pedagogy witnessed in teaching hospitals. The peculiarity of pedagogy also lives within the array of seeming contradictions between espoused and enacted practices. For example, whilst outwardly espousing innovation and creativity, contemporary higher education may be found largely to enact this in a manner that conforms to homogenous and conservative norms of practice.

It is important to note that we think of peculiarities not in a pejorative, but in a celebratory sense. However, some of these peculiarities can lead to schisms within the traditional academic identity, particularly within research-intensive institutions. Here, the keystones of the role demand different approaches to practice where, as we have seen, pedagogic practice is often perceived to be the poorer partner of research, leading to teaching that can be described as ‘research-drained’ (Hosein, 2017). It is also important that we unpack our own interpretation of pedagogy. This we take as something that not only signposts the relationship that underpins the transmission and co-creation of knowledge, but a knowledge-based relationship that catalyses social, cultural, political and economic transformations. We thus think of pedagogy as that which underpins what it is, not only to be a teacher, but also a researcher and even a manager. Therefore, pedagogical peculiarity, for us, is recognition of the way in which higher education is itself a unique opportunity for immersion in multiple and diverse relationships of and with knowledge. These relationships are then enacted through a varied range of practices, ideologies and aspirations concerning how to, where to, and with whom to teach. And yet this is an aspect of the higher education discourse that struggles to find a voice due, in part, to ‘a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract’ (Palmer, 1998: 12).

In response to this fear of the personal, we have chosen to adopt a less conventional, conversational approach (Gall et al., 2003) to critical inquiry that is
PREFACE

arranged as a series of what we term ‘deliberative dialogues’. These dialogues will take place between experts in pedagogy and academics working within specific disciplinary and institutional contexts. It will respond to existing empirical and conceptual ‘blank-spots’ related to how pedagogical development is perceived, experienced and responded to by academics across the disciplines. In so doing, it will stimulate critical awareness of the influence of pedagogical development on academic tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). This will be achieved through a consideration of the key challenges faced and workarounds developed in response. It is intended to cater for broad and deep reflection, exploration, discovery and interrogation of the peculiarities and of their contexts. Through this approach, we hope to illuminate the processes undertaken by academics in developing their academic practice and pedagogic knowledge-base, and will provide a necessary and currently missing critique of the peculiarity of teaching practice and the idealisation of teaching excellence in higher education (as opposed to enhancement). In essence, we intend to explore what it means to be a contemporary academic.

This book attempts to interrogate how academics in a range of contemporary higher education settings seek to understand the implications, issues and impacts associated with their work in current, and often challenging, contexts. In so doing, the authors will unpack the pedagogical peculiarities characterising their university teaching cultures. This will be achieved through an exploration of the relationship between identity on an individual, disciplinary and institutional level. Identity is of particular significance as it underpins who we are, and what we do as practitioners. As Palmer (1998: 10) notes:

good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher…good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work.

Ultimately the book’s distinctiveness is its articulation of different pedagogical identities. These emanate from, and are characterised by different teaching and learning environments – across different institutions and sectors. As such, the major contribution of Pedagogical Peculiarities lies in the development of a discourse of pedagogy in higher education, comprised of multiple contexts. This serves to highlight the current contexts and challenges across higher education as they relate and respond to ideology, values, policy and changes in the organisation of the sector.

And so we begin this book by first reflecting on what it is to enact a teaching role. Where is the role situated? Is it at least on the surface, lower down a pecking order of priorities within an academic role? Is it seen as being an obstacle that impedes the fulfilment of other aspects of the academic role? We argue that self-scrutiny of our professional identities will serve to critique the reductionist notions of what a university education and even what the university is for (Collini, 2012). It will also serve to extend our understanding of the complexity and messiness of the academic role, particularly as it is framed by pedagogy. As a result, each chapter of
this book serves to illuminate a variety of the tensions that arise between different stakeholders (e.g. students, staff, senior management), levels (e.g. societal, sectorial, institutional, disciplinary and individual), and disciplines/fields (e.g. veterinary medicine, performing arts, medical physics). Underpinning and, indeed potentially fuelling such tensions, are the personal and collective values that inform individual, disciplinary and institutional identity. However, in spite of the tensions, challenges and areas of contestation that each chapter raises, there is also a collective call for reciprocal relationships to be established through a more holistic approach to academic practice that is informed and guided by dialogue.

OVERVIEW OF BOOK STRUCTURE

As outlined above, a theme running through this volume focuses on academics seeking to understand their work in current (and challenging) contexts, in relation to their pedagogical identities at three key levels:

i. Individual level;
ii. Disciplinary level, and;
iii. Institutional level.

As a result, in addition to the introductory (chapter 1) and concluding (chapter 8) chapters, Pedagogical Peculiarities is divided into three sections:

a. Identity as it relates to teaching (chapters 2 and 3);
b. Identity as it relates to the discipline (chapters 4 and 5), and;
c. Identity as it relates to the institution (chapters 6 and 7).

In chapter 1, Brookfield focuses on two peculiarities of higher education: ideological control, and contextuality. The first peculiarity draws attention to the ideological control that pervades higher education in the form of instrumentalism. The second highlights the constant presence of contextuality in that the illusion of pedagogic independence is broken down when acknowledging the influence of the wider context (i.e. institutional, political, societal etc.) on ones pedagogic practices. These peculiarities intersect within the generally unacknowledged meta-peculiarity of higher education pedagogy – its emotional nature. As Brookfield notes, ‘Living with the fiction of controllability and emotional evenness is impossible when you’re constantly having to make adjustments seemingly “on the fly”’. Thus highlighting the inherently unpredictable nature of teaching and learning and need for a revival of rebellious subjectivity.

a. Identity as it relates to teaching

In their chapter that focuses on the influence of personal values on professional practice and how these relate to the concept of professionalism, Young and Lygo-Baker consider the interplay between the individual and the group(s) encountered
over a career in the formation of identity. Within chapter 2, the authors reflect upon how identity and professionalism are linked. As Brookfield calls for in chapter 1, Young and Lygo-Baker argue for a less instrumental approach to how professionalism is conceived. This may be achieved through an exploration of how personal values influence identity, and an acknowledgement of the benefits (and challenges) of pluralism in the learning and teaching environment. The authors point out that it is only through a broadening of what is encompassed by the concept of professionalism, through the examination of the interaction between personal and collective values that practitioners can connect espoused with enacted practice and evolve as teachers. Thereby supporting students from subject expertise (i.e. competency) to expert practice, as discussed in chapter 4.

In chapter 3, Medland, James and Bailey, explore the competing pressures of personal versus social identity within the context of the performing arts. They consider the misalignments that can emerge between identity, aspirations and the values of the institution, discipline and individual. Much of these tensions are grounded within the market-driven instrumentalist ideology that pervades higher education (as discussed in chapters 1 and 6), resulting in contestation between an individual’s personal and social identity and values. Such tensions require individuals to explicitly explore the interaction between the two sets of values and, at times, to compromise. Such compromise can been seen as an encroachment on academic freedom and can result in divergent behaviours: it can force individuals into viewing the role of practitioner and educator as distinct and therefore in competition (as discussed by Nicholls and Lygo-Baker in chapter 7), or it can encourage individuals to revert back to their central point of reference (i.e. professional identity) which can lead to a stalemate. One means of addressing this impasse is through the adoption of a more collective approach to development. For an institution to support a more symbiotic interaction between personal and social identity, a greater focus on quality enhancement towards a more flexible approach to quality assurance that embraces the nuances of different subject areas, may be worthwhile and is supported by Nicholls and Lygo-Baker in chapter 7. Whilst examination of the values underpinning our pedagogic practice can support this from the individual perspective (as considered by Young and Lygo-Baker in chapter 2), thereby becoming less susceptible to the pedagogic frailty identified by Kinchin et al. in chapter 4.

b. Identity as it relates to the discipline

Kinchin, Kingsbury and Buhmann, in chapter 4, reflect upon the relationship between research and teaching within an academic development programme. Through their experiences of the programme, the authors reflect upon the pedagogical abilities that underpin the pathway between subject expertise and expert practice, and the need for academics to see pedagogy as a central feature of their disciplinary structure. In order to enhance the relationship between academic development and the disciplines, Kinchin et al. highlight the need to view research as pedagogy, thus supporting
academics to embrace a more scholarly approach to the pedagogy underpinning academic practice, and highlighting the potentially influential role of the external examiner within this process. Key to the enactment of research as pedagogy is the concepts of authenticity, prestige, and an ability to critically reflect upon practice. However, the perpetuation of separating research and teaching may contribute to the development of pedagogic frailty within an institution.

Hosein and Harle, in chapter 5, reflect upon the pedagogical vulnerability of a small interdisciplinary sub-discipline, Medical Physics, and the factors that may affect the implementation of an appropriate pedagogy. The authors explore the key challenges that impact Medical Physics and the disciplinary fracturing that has emerged based on the divergent pedagogic approaches of the two main post-graduation vocational applications (i.e. practice versus theory and research). This pedagogic disciplinary fracturing between institutions may cause conflict regarding which is the most appropriate pedagogical approach. Rivalry, nepotism and vulnerability, can all serve to strangle pedagogic innovation in favour of the status quo, as highlighted in chapter 7 by Nicholls and Lygo-Baker. Hosein and Harle, therefore, call for a more holistic approach to pedagogy (as argued for in relation to research and teaching in chapter 4, and quality assurance and quality enhancement in chapter 7), a community of practice that gives voice to and engages in dialogue with all stakeholders and, as Nicholls and Lygo-Baker advocate, that places students at the heart of the search for an appropriate pedagogy.

c. Identity as it relates to the institution

In their chapter that focuses on the influence of competitive accountability within the broader higher education context, Watermeyer and Tomlinson, as in chapter 1, dissect the influence of the marketization of pedagogy whilst acknowledging the influence of the national and global economy, and government. In an era of increasing public scrutiny, the authors of chapter 6 consider how this wider context can serve to reinforce the artificial separation of research and teaching (as considered by Kinchin et al. in chapter 4), and how the competitive accountability colouring higher education can conflict with personal identity, praxis and priorities (as discussed by Young and Lygo-Baker, in chapter 2). The subsequent cult of administration enforcing a performative audit culture can result in the destabilisation of identity caused by a conflict between personal and collective values, as unpacked by Medland et al. in chapter 3. Watermeyer and Tomlinson proceed to argue that higher education’s audit society de-incentivises pedagogical development in favour of pedagogical conservatism, as discussed by Kinchin et al., and erodes trust (as considered by Young and Lygo-Baker in chapter 2) in favour of continuous performance evaluations. In response to these challenges, the authors seek to ‘free pedagogy from its coupling with performance’, by listening to the critical demands of the student (as concluded by Nicholls and Lygo-Baker in chapter 7). And, as
Young and Lygo-Baker contest, to transform the focus from a competitive to a moral imperative.

In chapter 7, Nicholls and Lygo-Baker focus on the architecture of the higher education landscape by exploring the tensions emerging between pedagogical experimentation and resistance to change within a higher education framework in flux. Central to this focus sits the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement, as discussed in chapters 3 (Medland et al.) and 4 (Kinchin et al.). According to the authors, at the heart of the interplay between quality assurance and enhancement, lies the student and their relationship to other stakeholders (e.g. staff, the institution), particularly with regard to their potential to influence both strands. Where perceived conflicts emerge between legislative interpretation and enhancement for instance, this can remove the centrality of the student in favour of maintaining the status quo, and lead to unnecessary perceived juxtapositions between quality assurance and enhancement. Nicholls and Lygo-Baker go on to highlight the influential nature of ones values and fundamentality of staying true to these whilst acknowledging the importance of locating workarounds that aim towards the synthesis of quality assurance and enhancement. However, this can result in retrenching into ones disciplinary boundaries due to perceptions of threats to the identity of the person or group, as seen in Medland et al.’s chapter 3, thus highlighting the importance of trust as considered by Young and Lygo-Baker (chapter 2) and Watermeyer and Tomlinson (chapter 6). As a result, the authors emphasise the importance of celebrating disciplinary differences within the concept of professionalising pedagogic practice and encouraging a symbiotic relationship between quality assurance and enhancement so that a meaningful dialogue is created and sustained between stakeholders (e.g. students, staff, senior management etc.).

Finally, in the concluding chapter of the book (chapter 8), Ashwin shifts the focus from teaching in higher education to the peculiar nature of academic development. In pursuing the question of what is distinctive about university teaching (as opposed to other levels of education) the author identifies the three forms of knowledge (knowledge-as-research; knowledge-as-curriculum, and; knowledge-as-student-understanding) that are produced within a single institution. In considering this peculiar feature of university teaching as a framework for reflecting upon the preceding chapters, Ashwin examines seven tensions that have important implications for how we understand the nature of academic development and its relationship to the enhancement of teaching and learning at an institutional and sector-wide level. As considered in the previous chapters, the seven tensions identified by the author explore what it is to be a contemporary academic, the contestation between enhancement and excellence and the crucial role that academic development plays in supporting the development of less conformist approaches to university teaching. In so doing, Ashwin concludes Pedagogical Peculiarities by seeking to develop a coherent, holistic and challenging agenda for the future of academic development.
REFERENCES


1. PEDAGOGICAL PECULIARITIES

AN INTRODUCTION

The particular peculiarity of teaching smashed into my consciousness with unassailable force in September 1970. I’d been employed as a part-time teacher of ‘Liberal Studies’ at Lewisham and Eltham College of Further Education in south east London. Several dramatic events happened in my first two days of teaching, the most memorable of which was when an inter-racial fist fight broke out in one of my classes between an English boy and a Caribbean boy. I was, of course, completely clueless about what to do. Somehow I got through the lesson relatively unscathed without police or even other teachers showing up in class. But as I rode back to my shared bedsit that night I remember asking myself ‘how do people do this for a living?’

The longer I taught the more I realized that this incident revealed a fundamental peculiarity of life in higher education. Colleges and universities are organized on an assumption that is profoundly distorted; the assumption that teaching and learning are primarily cognitive phenomena that can therefore be rationally organized. Programs are designed, curricula are developed, measures of assessment are implemented and teaching activities are planned, all premised on the idea that learning occurs in a logically sequenced way. Classroom and homework exercises are structured to take students from the simple to the complex, the introductory to the intermediate and advanced and from uncritical assimilation to critical analysis. The organizing vision is of learners gradually internalizing skills and knowledge as they advance along a measurable continuum of progress. Who benefits from this vision? And where does a racially motivated fist fight fit into this neat picture?

This highly rational vision of learning works for the good of funding institutions and administrators, not learners. It assumes that learning proceeds forward in a linear manner without any plateaus or fall backs. It also assumes that learning is experienced in roughly the same way by all those enrolled in any particular degree. And, of course, it assumes that learning is a matter of cognition, of developing thoughtful reasoning in which powers of analysis, logic and appraisal become refined over time. In perhaps the biggest peculiarity of all, higher education completely ignores the emotional underpinning to so much learning and teaching. The triumph of the instrumentalist view of higher education is to make college and university practices all a matter of informational and pedagogic inputs and
pre-identified learning outcomes. Learning thus becomes commodified in terms of attainment and testing, with comparisons supposedly being able to be drawn across and between scores on standardized tests. This allows for the full paraphernalia of league tables, institutional rankings and the grading of teachers on a spuriously valid axis of ‘competence’.

The absence in standardized assessment measures of any recognition of the powerful role that emotions play in learning and teaching is probably not surprising given their inherent volatility. Emotions explode the pretence of controllability. When that fight broke out in my first week of college teaching I knew that I was not controlling anything. Obviously, I couldn’t control the emotional lives of the students involved and nor could I control the responses of other members of the class. But just as importantly for me I couldn’t control my own emotions. Although that day happened in September 1970 I can still recall the fear and panic that washed over me that morning as I saw the fragile vision of college teaching as civil but critical dialogue get smashed into pieces. I was clueless and alone, fearful that a classroom riot was about to break out and deeply embarrassed by my inability of knowing how to respond.

For the rest of that first year of part-time teaching my existence was completely dominated by the fear of losing control. I only taught on Thursday and Friday each week but those two days were the experiential Mount Kilimanjaro towering over the Great Plains of my everyday existence from Saturday to Wednesday. My time out of the classroom was consumed either by preparing myself for the impostorship I knew I would feel as soon as I entered the college premises, or by trying to keep my self-laceration at bay as I reflected on the failure I had been. I can’t really remember any of the exercises or activities I employed during that year, but I can bring that state of fearful panic to mind in an instant.

In this chapter I want to examine two particular pedagogic peculiarities, both of which are woven throughout the chapters in this book. The first peculiarity is the ideologically grounded nature of pedagogy. I contend that as we are engaging in the seemingly neutral business of teaching our subject’s content many of us are caught in ideological contradictions that produce frustration, alienation and sadness. Spending your life trying to work in a way that feels student-centred, democratic or radical, all the while being constrained and compromised by politically inspired structural reforms is bound to take its emotional toll.

The second peculiarity – the contextuality of practice – explores how plans, predictions and possibilities developed in tranquillity become transformed into something completely different when executed in a real life setting. Muddling through particularity and uncertainty is the ontology of college teaching. An exercise that worked wonderfully well with a group last week falls dismally flat with another group this week. A well-rehearsed activity spirals out of control because of an unanticipated question that’s been raised or a particular student’s reaction. Living with the fiction of controllability and emotional evenness is impossible when you constantly have to make adjustments seemingly ‘on the fly’.
THE IDEOLOGICAL NATURE OF PEDAGOGY; ALONE WHILST NEVER ALONE

This first peculiarity focuses on the way in which classroom events are shaped by forces and structures in the world outside. My discussion of this peculiarity is framed within the perspective of the body of work known as critical social theory (Brookfield, 2005). One of my early assumptions as a teacher was that the classroom was a sort of fiefdom in which I was the Lord of the Manor able to control what happened within my domain. I have always taught with the classroom door shut, even when my employing organization has preferred an open door policy. This is because I’d regarded the classroom as my space, an arena in which I could do what I wanted. My classroom door was closed because I didn’t want the outside world intruding while I was doing my own pedagogic thing in the little world I was creating.

The illusory nature of this assumption of pedagogic independence was made apparent in the first couple of weeks of my career. My students were all apprentices learning electrical, plumbing, heating and secretarial trades and once word got back to their employers that they were expected to spend an hour of their day release in ‘Liberal Studies’ all hell broke loose. My students told me in the second or third week of term that their employers had flatly informed them that the hour spent with me was totally unnecessary and that they should not be wasting their time showing up to my class. So a further assumption I’d held – that college students were there because they wanted to learn – was dismantled.

Over the years this peculiarity has become a central feature of my reality. I am alone while never being alone. By this I mean that I am physically alone in the classroom in the sense that I am usually teaching solo, either face-to-face or online. Yet my actions are always embedded in a web of networks that shape my decisions. So my room is symbolically stacked with holographic images of the multiple stakeholders whose agendas and priorities influence very directly the micro-decisions I constantly make as a teacher. About a decade into my career Margaret Thatcher was one of these holograms and my refusal to pay attention to her meant I was fired in 1981 at the beginning of her austerity regime. Provosts, Presidents, heads of department and Boards of Trustees members are always in the room but so also are state legislators, local council members, members of congress, senators and the President of the United States. Prominent alumni whose generous financial donations have funded the buildings in which I work are there along with a range of media figures, bloggers and commentators whose ranting’s frame the climate of opinion surrounding the proper purpose and functioning of higher education. There are corporate CEO’s whose agendas and lobbying change national budgetary priorities and determine what’s left for education. And, always lurking in the background is the presence of the accreditation agencies that bestow credibility on my organization.

The external boards that accredited the diplomas and certification my students were pursuing back in 1970 required that students receive the one hour of ‘Liberal Studies’ instruction I was hired to provide. But, as already mentioned, the employers who subsidized the students’ attendance opposed this. When I worked in community
adult education I was encouraged to develop courses and workshops that were creative and flexible, yet my Local Education Authority (LEA) needed these to be financially stable. So if I ran a weekend institute on, say, ‘Living in Communes’, this would have to be balanced by a weekly Yoga class to ensure that my enrolment numbers looked good. In my first American University post I was told by the President that it didn’t matter how much I published or how good the reviews of my teaching were, I needed to bring in 20–25 new postgraduate students a year so that their tuition fees could fund my line.

A specific example of how these holograms directly affect my pedagogy has been repeated four times in three different institutions. In each of these universities I taught in doctoral programmes in which team-teaching was the norm. Each of these programmes had been approved with the understanding that team-teaching was the preferred pedagogy for doctoral level work. The benefits of team-teaching have been well documented (Eisen & Tisdell, 2000; Plank, 2011). A team of professors can model both collaboration and critique, and demonstrate in a vividly personal way the reality that multiple viewpoints usually exist around issues of the moment in any disciplinary field. A team can model striving for intersubjective understanding – seeing an issue through colleagues’ eyes – by asking questions that sought to understand a contrary point of view. They can show what respectful disagreement looks like. In a team taught course students can see examples of people changing their minds as they’re convinced by a better argument or more persuasive evidence, and of how being open to critique is essential to intellectual development.

In these three different postgraduate programmes team-teaching was deliberately chosen as the preferred model of instruction to help students learn. Classroom exercises were developed, curriculum was planned and assessment was designed all to be an analogue of the team-teaching approach adopted by faculty. So there was a heavy emphasis on group projects, on student-led ‘teach-ins’, even the adoption of a new doctoral dissertation format that allowed final theses to be written collaboratively by teams of students. Yet, in all three of these university doctorates the team teaching model was eventually abandoned solely for budgetary reasons. Students had consistently evaluated the team-teaching approach as a highlight of these programmes and the lecturers and professors remained completely committed to the method. But, as endowments dropped, enrolments declined, competitors priced their doctorates more cheaply, and trustees hired new institutional leaders to ‘clean house’, ‘get rid of dead wood’ and ‘forge a path for the future’, the administrators of these programmes were all told that team-teaching was to be abandoned. No matter that the whole doctoral student experience had been deliberately designed around this pedagogy, it was now considered just too expensive.

In the first two decades of the twenty first century, higher education (at least in the three countries in which I’ve worked – the United Kingdom, Canada, and the USA) is ideologically determined by the acceptance of the twin ideologies of capitalism and bureaucratic rationality. This is why an understanding of the body of work of critical social theory (Browne, 2017) becomes necessary for us to understand
the daily pedagogic decisions we make. Critical theory explores how blatantly unequal systems stay in place with minimal challenge to their legitimacy. Consent is secured through the dissemination of dominant ideology. Basically, if people can be persuaded to accept the idea that things are organized the way they are for the ultimate good of all, and that the bad things that happen (being fired, hospitals, post offices and schools closing) are as uncontrollable as the onset of a hurricane or snow storm, then the system remains intact.

Abandoning team-teaching as the primary pedagogy in doctorates described was linked directly to external political events. First was the financial collapse of 2008 that wiped out many university endowments, caused potential students to lose jobs and be unable to afford tuition, and meant that enormous state resources had to be channelled to propping up the banks, insurance companies and financial houses that were ‘too big to fail’. Second was the growth of Indian, Chinese and South East Asian economies that led to capital moving overseas and jobs being lost in the USA. Third was the urging of business and opinion leaders that higher education should promote the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines in order that the US be able to compete more effectively in the global marketplace by inventing new products and production processes. Along with this went the declared need to prepare students for professional roles in managing the new information and service (rather than manufacturing) economy.

The matter of fact acceptance of the ideology of unfettered capitalism framed all these events. After the financial collapse the response of the media, political elites and opinion-maker class was that capitalism was to be preserved at all costs. So it’s no surprise that the doctorates in adult education that I helped create were prime targets for gutting as universities moved to funding STEM schools and departments and as schools of law, entrepreneurship and business were expanded. Since having two or three lecturers teach one course was much costlier than having only one person in charge, it was decreed that team teaching cease. So the removal of team teaching from these programmes can thus be traced directly back to the actions of the major players in the 2008 financial collapse. To me there can’t be a clearer example of how the minutiae of practice is always to some extent determined by broader political events.

As mentioned earlier working within an ideologically framed higher education system that has become increasingly tied to the needs of capitalism puts many teachers in an emotionally dissonant situation. So many of us go into university teaching because we love our subjects and want to share the primary joy of intellectual discovery that we experienced as novice learners. We want ‘to turn our students on’ to the joys of engineering, theology, history, mathematics or sociology so that they feel the excitement we enjoyed as we saw things come together, encounter new ideas or be stimulated by an uncomfortable critique. We also want to teach authentically in a way that reflects who we are as people with enthusiasms, passions and frailties. We don’t want always to have to be the ‘expert’ who constantly enforces rules as norms; rather, we wish to be a collaborative co-learner participating in a common intellectual quest.
But this desire to work in an authentic way is in constant contradiction to the ideological nature of higher education. I have already talked about the way in which capitalism frames educational practices, so let me turn now to another associated ideological component – bureaucratic rationality. Bureaucratic rationality is the organizing principle that flows from the ethic of capitalism. Just as manufacturing is organized most profitably based on the division of labour, so bureaucratic rationality posits that organizations like colleges and universities work most effectively when teaching and learning is divided into discrete units. Disciplinary divides function on the principle that knowledge can be compartmentalized; theology over here and philosophy over there, as if each occupies its own epistemological universe. Within disciplines knowledge is chunked into components and instruction is similarly chunked into temporal blocks; you will learn this topic from 11.00 a.m.–11.55 a.m. each Tuesday and Thursday.

Two classics of critical theory – *Eclipse of Reason* (Horkheimer, 1974) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) – examine the ways in which bureaucratic rationality has led to thought and reasoning becoming instrumentalised. In *Eclipse of Reason* (1974) Horkheimer argues that the capacity to reason (surely a central concern of anyone working in higher education) has been dominated by the shift to an instrumental kind of reason, one ‘essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory’ (p. 3). When reason is instrumentalised it is made subservient to practical utilitarian ends. Diverting reason from the study of universal questions, and attaching it to the resolution of short term practical problems, also serves to maintain the current political and economic order.

Instrumental reasoning displays a dominance of means-end thinking whereby reason is applied to solve problems of how to attain certain short-term social and economic objectives. Its application to exploring abstract universals such as justice, equality and tolerance becomes viewed as impractical and unrealistic, irrelevant to the social project of retaining a competitive edge in global capitalism. This is the triumph of what Herbert Marcuse (1964) called one dimensional thought. One dimensional thought is instrumental thought focused on how to make the current system work better and perform more effectively. When people think this way they start to conceive of the range of possibilities open to them in life within a framework predefined by the existing order. People assume that all is for the best in society, that things are arranged the way they are for a good reason, and that the current system works for the benefit of all. In this system philosophical thought, even of an apparently critical kind, serves only to keep the system going.

The higher education factory produces artefacts and commodities – papers, projects, test results, theses and dissertations – that are assigned value both within the institution and in the wider marketplace. Within the institution points and grades are awarded to student work that accumulate over time into a grade point average or some other cumulative marker of value. These markers of value become conflated with students’ self-image so that receiving anything less than an ‘A’ becomes a
personal tragedy. Students negotiate for grades with teachers to develop their personal portfolios of accomplishment that are then presented to future employers or to secure entry into postgraduate programmes. Drawing on Marx (1961) this is the commodification of learning; the turning of the creative labour of learning into an artefact assigned an external value. The use value of the labour (its meaning and utility for the student) is far overshadowed by its exchange value (the better jobs or entry into programmes of further study it is traded for).

It’s also clear that students, at least in the USA where I work, enter into an economic calculation when deciding where and what to study. Regarding the location of study, I have been a professor at two elite Ivy League universities (Columbia and Harvard) and at each one I was struck by the fact that the tuition students paid for their degrees and diplomas was several times higher than that of many surrounding universities. When I asked students why they didn’t get their Bachelor’s, Master’s or doctorate at a much less expensive institution they told me overwhelmingly that they were prepared to pay an outrageous amount of money because a degree from an Ivy League institution was worth so much more in the market place and in terms of prestige and status. Students had assigned a value to their degrees assuming that these could be traded for better paying and higher status jobs.

The ideology of bureaucratic rationality has a profound impact on the lives of teachers who regard themselves working within progressive, radical or humanistic traditions, all of which emphasize student-centeredness, creativity and the creation of democratic classrooms. Bureaucratic rationality supports a system set up to make realizing those traditions very difficult and trying to subvert from within carries with it the promise of a life of frustration and alienation. This reality is implicit in Simon Lygo-Baker and Karen Young’s discussion in chapter 2 of the way that unquestioned disciplinary boundaries and identities preclude a complex, interdisciplinary analysis of knowledge. Anesa Hosein and Jamie Harle’s commentary in chapter 5 on how external regulators and accreditation bodies enforce compliance also illustrates the difficulties of working in creative ways.

Bureaucratic rationality underlies the accountability discourse examined by Emma Medland, Alison James and Niall Bailey in chapter 3 and aspects of university management by Gill Nicholls and Simon Lygo-Baker in chapter 7. Accountability makes sense only if you believe a valid and reliable measure of achievement can be laid over the reality of the complexities of learning that exist in a single class, let alone across multiple disciplines and institutions. Exercising the kind of creativity in teaching methods and forms of assessment explored by Richard Watermeyer and Michael Tomlinson in chapter 6 becomes almost impossible if you work in a system that commodifies learning, divides it into discrete disciplines and instructional units, and overlays learning with the temporal necessity of being forced to complete specified objectives and attain declared outcomes by a certain calendar date. Disciplinary divides are further compounded by the argument that signature pedagogies – approaches to teaching that are unique to a particular discipline – prevent any transfer of ideas or practices across departments and
Ian M. Kinchin, Martyn Kingsbury and Stefan Yoshi Buhmann also emphasize in chapter 4 the peculiarity, not to say idiocy, of assuming that the different rhythms of teaching and research can be compressed into a unitary time frame.

One final matter needs addressing in this discussion of the first peculiarity and that is aesthetics and play. In two other classics of critical theory – *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978) – Herbert Marcuse developed a theory of critical learning that has direct implications for the issues examined in more detail in the chapters ahead. Essentially Marcuse argued that a crucial dynamic in learning to think critically was exposing students to some kind of unmediated aesthetic engagement. In order to free people from the instrumental reasoning so dominant in one dimensional thought, they needed to experience a powerfully estranging experience that would shatter their normal ways of thinking, seeing and believing. This was the function of art, broadly defined as aesthetic engagements (poetry, films, realistic and abstract art, music, plays, novels and so on). Tasting a new form of experience is inherently revolutionary according to Marcuse and the power to initiate this is ‘the critical, negating function of art’ (Marcuse, 1978, p. 7).

Art can induce ‘the transcendence of immediate reality’ which ‘shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity’ (ibid.).

Marcuse is careful to recognize that ‘art cannot change the world’ (1978, p. 32) though he does believe that ‘it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world’ (ibid.). Art represents only ‘the promise of liberation’ (1978, p. 46) not its actuality, and ‘clearly, the fulfillment of this promise is not within the domain of art’ (ibid.). What art does offer us, however, is a chance of breaking with the familiar, of inducing in us an awareness of other ways of being in the world. Art ‘opens the established reality to another dimension; that of possible liberation’ (1972, p. 87). If radical political practice is focused on creating ‘a world different from and contrary to the established universe of discourse and behaviour’ (1969, p. 73) then art is one important prompt to this state of difference. Working to create a free society therefore involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative world’ (1969, p. 6).

When we submit to the aesthetic power of a work of art we immerse ourselves in an experience in which different rules are present. There is a tyranny of form and structure present, ‘a necessity which demands that no line, no sound could be replaced’ (1978, p. 42). Because the rules of creative, artistic necessity are radically different from those governing social and economic necessity, works of art that adhere to these rules induce an estrangement from contemporary life. In this way ‘art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experiences, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle’ (1978, p. 72). The rules that make for effective art (effectiveness
being defined as the capacity to induce an altered consciousness) are quite separate from the rules that make for effective adult education practice, to take one example. Art ‘has its own language and illuminates reality only through this other language’ (p. 22).

Marcuse’s theory of aesthetics seems to speak most directly to the issues regarding the performing arts discussed in chapter 3 by Emma Medland, Alison James and Niall Bailey. However, the logic of Marcuse’s argument is really discipline-free. If artistic engagement is an element of critical thinking that helps people think out of the box, avoid disciplinary groupthink and escape the dominance of disciplinary paradigms then encouraging students to engage with the arts is just as crucial for Simon Lygo-Baker and Karen Young’s description of veterinary pedagogy in chapter 2 and to the small disciplines examined in chapter 5 by Anesa Hosein and Jamie Harle. Furthermore, the standardized licensing and accreditation measures discussed by Richard Watermeyer and Michael Tomlinson in chapter 6 have little or no place for assessing the effectiveness of the aesthetic engagements argued by Marcuse as necessary to critical thought. This is because the encounters with art that Marcuse urges must be separate from any kind of educational supervision or monitoring.

For people to function as autonomous critical thinkers they must be able to remove themselves from the day to day reality of the surrounding culture. Immersion in artistic experience is one way to induce an estrangement from the rhythms of normal life, but it must be solitary. Experiencing art communally at a gallery, theatre, poetry reading or concert is, Marcuse argues, inherently conservative. Our responses to the art concerned are pre-conditioned by our awareness of the presence of others and by the mediator’s (the docent, music appreciation teacher, or headphones guide) effort to explain the art and place it in its historical context. But when someone experiences a deeply personal, completely private reaction to a work of art, she ‘enters another dimension of existence’ (1978, p. 4); the dimension of inwardness, of liberating subjectivity. Such subjectivity is liberating because we are moved by primal aesthetic and creative impulses, not the dictates of majority opinion or common sense criteria of beauty.

It would be impossible to compare multiple unsupervised student engagements with art using the language of accountability described in chapter 6. The whole point of the aesthetic experience in Marcuse’s view is that it is unaccountable. There should be no attempt to compare artistic engagements to a norm or to demonstrate their societal utility. On the contrary, aesthetics is designed to shatter the notion of accountability and broader utility by replacing it with a powerful and sensual immediacy. If there is any merit to Marcuse’s theory of aesthetics, then a basic contradiction exists between teaching students to think critically (the declared purpose of higher education) and competitive accountability. In order to think critically you must have an uncontrolled, unsupervised immersion in a powerful artistic experience that should be completely unaccountable or controlled. And this must happen individually with no formal curriculum or objectives in place that allow for comparisons to be made.
THE CLEANSING OF CONTEXTUALITY

Institutional conceptions of teaching are grounded in the notion of controllability. The assumption is that how and what students learn can be controlled by setting standardized learning objectives and outcomes, taking students through the same carefully sequenced curricula, administering standardized tests at the same points in a curricular sequence, and using common measures of assessment. Doing these things will allow comparisons to be made across multiple classrooms and institutions.

This is bureaucratic rationality’s attempt to cleanse the empirical world of the annoying reality of contextuality. It’s informed by the same logic that seeks to discover or generate ‘best practices’ in teaching that can then be disseminated and imposed across multiple settings as a means of ensuring comparison and standardization. This neo-Fordist worldview regards contextuality as an annoying and unfortunate aberration, something to be removed so that the system of higher education can function smoothly. Trustees, governors and governments can be assured that predictable outcomes are assured and that the measures allowing league tables to rate institutional effectiveness are both reliable and valid.

The language of accountability and comparability assumes that higher education classrooms are a unitary phenomenon; that the same basic conditions for fostering student learning exist across classrooms and disciplines in multiple institutions. This assumption of comparability allows for the generation of standardized measures of learning and teaching. If the same basic process of teaching and learning happens in all higher education classrooms and with all students, then we can impose the same rubric to assess student learning and judge all teachers using the same basic evaluation instrument. This allows for institution C to be judged as better or worse than institution D or for teacher A’s effectiveness to be rated next to teacher B’s. Yet, as Stark and Freishtat’s (2014) study of different Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) forms observes, these forms typically ‘don’t measure teaching effectiveness. We measure what students say and pretend it’s the same thing. We calculate statistics, report numbers and call it a day’ (p. 9). There is the spurious scientism of percentages of students saying teacher did task A well or poorly. SET forms typically record students’ judgments of how well teachers explained ideas, responded to questions, provided prompt feedback, encouraged discussion and so on. Such observations have no necessary connection to understanding the internal process of what or how any particular student learned.

The assumption of the unitary nature of teaching and learning is flawed. In fact, the opposite is the case. We should assume that in any single higher education classroom the way people learn, and the teaching approaches they find most helpful in developing new skills, processing new information and interpreting ideas are bewilderingly complex and idiosyncratic. The cultural, psychological, cognitive and political complexities of learning mean that teaching is never innocent; you can never be sure of the effect you are having on students or the meanings people take from your words and actions. Things are always more complicated than they at first appear.
So the overwhelming peculiarity of teaching and learning is that it is inherently unpredictable. To take the example of just one student learning one particular idea, say the process of photosynthesis. How this single student learns to understand correctly the nature of photosynthesis, and how she or he demonstrates that learning, involves a complex interaction of multiple variables. There is the matter of that person’s particular brain chemistry that affects how the information about photosynthesis is processed. There is the level of readiness for learning he or she brings to the topic and the learning styles and habits she or he has developed over years. Does the student think verbally or visually? Is he or she used to group learning or to working independently?

Whatever is going on in the student’s life will play a big part in determining how much attention he or she pays to learning the process of photosynthesis. A student experiencing emotional problems, trying to negotiate relationship difficulties, or exhausted from working two jobs to pay for college will experience a particular class on a particular day in a way that’s very different from a student with none of these difficulties. The multiple realities that constitute just one student’s life on one single day in one single class complicate enormously the simple-minded assumption that all students share a unitary reality and that therefore ‘best practices’ for teaching these students can be generalized across multiple classrooms in multiple institutions.

And, of course, we’ve not even begun to discuss the contextuality of the teaching process yet. The particular ways that information about photosynthesis can be presented will work well with some students and not others. Students who think in a linear way and think textually will like being provided with a skeletal outline of lecture notes or a power point presentation dominated by lists of words. Students who think visually will want video and other images. Some students will respond well to analogy and metaphor, others will find this confusing. Some will be anxious to discuss their emerging understandings with peers, others will find this a waste of time. Providing space for students to ask clarifying questions will be appreciated by some whilst others will be annoyed by what they see as interruptions to the ‘real’ work of teacher delivery.

Then we come to the teacher or teachers in the room. Each individual teacher brings a host of experiences, pedagogic preferences, assumptions about students and levels of familiarity with the topic being taught. There will be an implicit philosophy of teaching present with ideas about what good teaching looks like. Is it an expertly dazzling series of explanations and demonstrations or a discussion that’s mostly student-led? Different teachers will welcome or become annoyed by frequent questions. For some it will the first time they’ve taught a unit, others will have decades of experience. Teachers may be distracted by a health problem, overwhelmed by a disintegrating personal relationship, intimidated by one or two students, disengaged because they know they won’t get tenure, or resentful because they’ve been assigned to teach a unit they dislike or feel no familiarity with.

When you put these two sets of variables together – the multiple experiences, brain chemistries and learning preferences of the different students and those of the particular teacher – you have a snapshot of the inevitable contextuality of teaching
and learning. There is no way in hell that the effects of a single teaching action such as starting off class by posing a question to the students can be predicted or measured. Depending on the make-up of students in class that day even the words making up a particular question itself will be heard in multiple and different ways. Then there are the different perceptions students have of the teacher. A racially mixed class will bring different assumptions about the teacher’s credibility to the table. A female teacher working with an overwhelmingly male class may have her authority questioned in a way that wouldn’t happen if the opposite were the case. The pervasive ideologies of White supremacy and patriarchy means that teachers who are women of colour will often be regarded as affirmative action hires. When I own up to making a mistake in class my positionality as an old White male means I’m rewarded for it; it’s often approvingly described by students as my being ‘vulnerable’. But if a younger, female teacher of colour makes the same mistake her students may well start to doubt her credibility. The mistake is pounced on as an example of incompetence displayed by someone only hired because of her race or gender.

Finally, the contextuality of particular classrooms in particular departments is nestled within the wider contextuality of the political and cultural climate of the host institution and the broader society. In the countries in which I’ve worked there’s been a normative privileging of speech and numeracy and linearity in both teaching methods and forms of assessment. Teachers talk as a means both of displaying authoritative command and inducting students into new bodies of knowledge. This happens in a linear fashion as students move incrementally from simple operations to more complex ones. The way students’ increasing command of knowledge and ideas is assessed is through the language they use in classroom discussion and the kinds of questions they ask. I myself use the questions students pose in class as the best quick measure of how well the material is being understood.

But questions invariably privilege language. What about creative forms of assessment that allow students to present evidence of their learning in ways that fit the different ways people process information? To paraphrase Bohannon’s (2011) provocative proposal, what about dancing your Ph.D.? Colleagues have often told me that I live in a postmodern world in which multiple subjectivities are the daily stuff of experience and in which identities are constantly reconfigured. If that’s so then this world has yet to permeate the part of higher education I inhabit. Poems, graphics, videos, and music are accepted in the performance arts disciplines discussed by Emma Medland, Alison James and Niall Bailey in chapter 3 but I would imagine they would have a much harder time being accepted as a valid demonstration of the kinds of veterinary competence examined by Simon Lygo-Baker and Karen Young in chapter 2.

MUDDLING THROUGH AS THE HONORABLE RESPONSE TO PECULIARITY

In this final section I want to propose what seems to me to be the only response to the peculiarities of ideology and contextuality – muddling through. Our lives as teachers
often boil down to our best attempts to muddle through the complex contexts and configurations that our classrooms represent. Studies of teachers’ narratives (Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2000; Mattos, 2009) indicate how teachers muddle through their careers. They report their work to be highly emotional and bafflingly chaotic. Career counsellors and popular films may portray teachers as transformative heroes skilfully navigating classroom dilemmas to empower previously sceptical students, but actual teacher narratives (Harbon & Moloney, 2013; Shadlow, 2013) emphasize much more how teaching is riddled with irresolvable dilemmas and complex peculiarities. Of course administrators and politicians don’t like to hear teachers say that they’re muddling through, so this peculiarity is rarely spoken of publicly.

The notion of muddling through actually draws on the grand philosophical tradition of American pragmatism as represented by Dewey, Pierce, Emerson and James. Although pragmatism is now colloquially understood as opportunism, as doing anything to get what you want (as in a politician flip-flopping on electoral promises), its philosophical roots lie in the veneration of experience and experimentation as important guides to action. A classically pragmatic approach emphasizes the importance of continuous experimentation to bring about better (in pragmatist terms, more beautiful) social forms. For example, pragmatism argues that in building a democratic society we experiment, change, and tinker constantly to make democracy work better. Part and parcel of this effort is discovering our own, and others’, fallibility. We make mistakes, adjust, broaden our experiences, seek out new perspectives, and talk to as many different people as possible. This is all done in the understanding that life is a constant process of experimentation as we pursue beautiful consequences.

Pragmatists hold that the way to become more knowledgeable about how to make democracy work better is through three strategies: (a) constant experimentation, (b) learning from mistakes, and (c) deliberately seeking out new information and possibilities. To me these are the three processes that are central to the process of muddling through teaching that I’m talking about. Muddling through is a kind of pragmatic dynamism requiring us to make constant adjustments based on emerging knowledge of how learning is experienced. Campuses are constantly adjusting to and incorporating new technologies, student bodies are becoming increasingly diverse, the information age and social media is changing how students communicate, and budgets are being cut even as numbers increase and contact hours lessen.

Teachers caught in these changes react pragmatically; they talk to as many colleagues as possible to borrow new ideas and exercises, they try things out in class that they hope will make more sense for a changing student body, and they try constantly to make sense of their experimentation. Team teaching is an inherently pragmatic pedagogy since it allows for mutual exploration of the different perspectives team members have on commonly shared classroom events. A good team is constantly debriefing the meaning of what happened in class and brainstorming what approaches might work best the next time the class meets.

Perhaps most importantly the best teachers respond to peculiarity by trying to find out how their students are experiencing their learning in multiple and complex ways.
They want to know which things are working well and which are misfiring so that they can make adjustments on the fly. In the last two decades an impressive body of work has emerged that provides examples of practices that teachers can use to gain this awareness. Evidence based teaching (Buskist & Groccia, 2011), classroom response systems (Bruff, 2009), and classroom assessment techniques (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009), all explore how to get inside students’ heads. Once we have this information we are better placed to judge which of our assumptions are correct, what perspectives we’ve missed, and how to respond in the moment to what we’re learning. This is part of what I regard as critically reflective teaching (Brookfield, 2017).

How do we muddle through the peculiarity of ideological control? If you’re caught in a system that is essential irrational but that prides itself on being highly rational it’s easy to experience a Kafkaesque alienation from your practice. To get tenure or stay in a job you have to teach material in prescribed chunks, at prescribed times and apply measures of assessment that have been externally imposed. If you are a junior lecturer who has little security or status it’s a political risk to point out and critique the way these constraints inhibit rather than enhance learning. Yet to act as if there’s no problem is to set yourself up for intra-psychic damage.

I think that dealing with the peculiarity of the ideologically framed nature of higher education requires a capacity to think and act politically. If you learn a measure of political shrewdness you can work in ways that are subversive to a dominant agenda. The first rule of political survival is to know what you are dealing with. As a newcomer to an institution who finds herself in an unfamiliar and possibly hostile situation, it is important to spend some time getting the lay of the land. I would suggest spending the first three to six months in a new job drawing a political map of the department, school or college. In departmental meetings, whole community e-mail conversations and senate gatherings try and work whose voice is taken seriously and where the power really resides. You need to work out what’s really rewarded, what organizational symbols are revered, and how far the mission statement is taken seriously.

You also need to learn something of the cultural and political history of the institution. There is nothing worse than blundering in with a well meant, supposedly ‘new’ suggestion only to find out later that a couple of years before you arrived the faculty spent six months considering, and then rejecting, something very similar. Probably the most important dimension of this anthropological work is researching the culturally approved language of the institution. A junior member of an organization who wishes to persuade those in power of the merits of a new and potentially threatening initiative would be well advised to couch their proposal in the language that is spoken and approved by those in power. In this regard knowing the mission statement is crucial. I have found that whenever I wish to propose something challenging, even threatening, the more I frame this using the language of the mission statement, the further I get.

Building alliances is also crucial to doing creative work that pushes back against the institutional culture. The one time I was fired I had no ally in the institution.
I had built no connections to other departments and I had never involved them in my programming. Consequently, no one had any stake in supporting me. When you can it’s also good to rack up what Shor (1996) calls ‘deviance credits’, organizational brownie points earned by publicly performing tasks crucial to institutional functioning. Examples might be serving on the alumni, library or diversity committee or helping to organize fund-raising events. Undertaking these tasks earns you a reputation as an organizational loyalist. They help you bank a large number of credits in the account of your organizational credibility. Winning awards from national or regional scholarly and professional bodies also helps your account grow.

If you have banked these credits, then you cannot be dismissed out of hand as a disloyal troublemaker when it comes time for you to take an oppositional stand. Your voice carries with it the institutional credibility of having performed these approved tasks. Cashing in your deviance credits at a strategic moment means you prize open a gap in which your concerns receive serious attention.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have argued that a generally unacknowledged meta-peculiarity of higher education pedagogy is its emotional nature. I have then focused on two specific peculiarities; the fact that we work in a system under ideological control and the constant presence of contextuality. I believe that the best response to these peculiarities is to work in a way informed by American pragmatism; that is, to engage in the experimental pursuit of the beautiful consequence of improved student command of skills and knowledge.

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