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What is happening to our Universities? Recent industrial action by academics in the UK against proposed pension changes is symptomatic of a wider unease about creeping corporatization of Universities, as policy re-casts them as sellers of education to fee-paying students and imposes ‘market driven’ research plans. The difference in vision (and salary) between academics and senior administrators is widened as new management structures widen and these developments are now spreading globally.

The dystopic nature of contemporary Universities was anticipated by Mary Evans in her book Killing Thinking as long ago as 2004. Her predicted demise of the University as a place of deep learning, replaced with a system of micro-management and new, super-imposed hierarchies between academics seems now to be a reality. The consequences of expanding higher education by making student ‘customers’ borrow to pay higher fees so that providers cover all their own costs were brutally exposed in such subsequent studies as Stefan Collini’s (2012) What are Universities For? which points to trends that threaten radically to undermine their original purpose.

Berg and Seeber (2016) take it as given that Universities have succumbed to neo-liberal values. Their aim is not to add to the growing literature on the transformation of Universities, but to challenge the new culture of speed to which it has led. They promote a series of survival strategies that could ultimately preserve the potential for slow, quality-driven research and learning among academics and students. Theirs is a manifesto for maximizing meaningful productivity, in place of today’s hurried production of short-lived outputs.

They start with a lament for the end of collegiality, as academics frantically try to stay ahead of the game - amid a climate of fear that forces compliance and a silencing of their concerns and ideas. High rates of mental health difficulties within academia are taken as a symptom of the detrimental effects of this new culture, and its relentless quest for fast production. A plethora of reports indicate that academia is now one of the most pressurized of the professions with its members increasingly falling prey to stress-related illnesses.

Allowing for greater collegiality is presented as one of the solutions to this new, privatized and isolated climate. Academics are urged to start talking to one another about their anxieties, even if the conversation topics are endless emails, writers’ block, rejected articles and failed grant applications. The premise is that all suffer from these anxieties, so being open and honest about them is the first step to overcoming them. To combat rising time pressures, they also advocate that academics pursue a state of ‘timelessness’ (or ‘being in the moment’) which will enable space for deep thinking and meaningful production. One approach is to have timetabled sessions for going ‘offline’, ignoring the noise and the buzz of the Internet and the unrelenting email demands.
Pleasure is inimical to the corporate ethos, Berg and Seeber (2016) argue, taking their cue from the slow food movement which savours it. Quality teaching depends critically on giving and receiving of knowledge as a form of pleasure. Yet the new form of teaching, driven by online ‘Rate My Professor’ scores and rapidly migrating from face-to-face to online lectures, is anathema to pleasure. One of the ways to restore it is to recognize the validity of affective emotions instead of quantifiable outcome measurements. The authors propose a series of steps to enhance the potential for positive affective experiences within the classroom, ranging from preparation and careful pacing to the use of laughter. They envision a ‘Manifesto of Pleasurable Pedagogy’ which would ultimately enhance the teacher and student experiences, and quality learning.

How does taking more time impact on research output? Here the authors aspire to a more measured, qualitative approach that prevents academics becoming machine-like producers of peer-reviewed articles and books. Again, the antidote to out-of-control ‘publish or perish’ is argued to lie with a more carefully paced approach to research. This means reflecting on what fundamentally matters rather than chasing the latest and most topical trend; perhaps even walking to the library rather than frantically searching online. Again Berg and Seeber (2016) return to the importance of social support and collegiality through which ideas can be exchanged in a non-judgemental and enjoyable fashion.

The authors deny that they want to de-radicalize their critique of new developments, but how successful are they? Many of the strategies they promote, while obviously helpful, remain utterly unreachable by most, especially early career and precarious academics - for whom the only way up the career ladder is to impress through flexible teaching and inexorable research outputs. How many academics can realistically ‘follow their hearts’ without stalling their careers? This counterblast will surely resonate in a world where tweeting, blogging and online networking become essential for dissemination, and economic pressure spreads online two-year degrees. But deep and slow thought risk a serious collision with the ‘metrics’ now imposed on University performance, to the extent that truly intellectual work may soon be confined to elite institutions or pursued in exile.

References