Interdisciplinarity and punishment in the academy: reflecting upon researching and teaching human rights in university settings

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Interdisciplinarity and punishment in the academy: Reflecting upon researching and teaching human rights in university settings

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Abstract

This article reflects upon the experience of researching and teaching human rights, and related areas, in a number of university settings. It is argued, on the one hand, that interdisciplinarity is necessary, present and considered valuable in academic human rights scholarship. On the other hand, the article argues that disciplinary power is exercised in the academy with the effect of limiting the degree to which interdisciplinary research and teaching can take place in practice. As a consequence, interdisciplinary academics (and students) are punished. Both intellectual horizons and material opportunities are potentially constricted. Reflecting upon this potential, the article considers whether it is practically possible to reduce or avoid the disciplining and punishment of this kind of teaching and research in universities and concludes by making the case for a postdisciplinary reimagining of human rights in the academy.

Keywords

disciplinary power; human rights; interdisciplinarity; postdisciplinarity; universities

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Interdisciplinarity and punishment in the academy: Reflecting upon researching and teaching human rights in university settings

Abstract

This article reflects upon the experience of researching and teaching human rights, and related areas, in a number of university settings. It is argued, on the one hand, that interdisciplinarity is necessary, present and considered valuable in academic human rights scholarship. On the other hand, the article argues that disciplinary power is exercised in the academy with the effect of limiting the degree to which interdisciplinary research and teaching can take place in practice. As a consequence, interdisciplinary academics (and students) are punished. Both intellectual horizons and material opportunities are potentially constricted. Reflecting upon this potential, the article considers whether it is practically possible to reduce or avoid the disciplining and punishment of this kind of teaching and research in universities and concludes by making the case for a postdisciplinary reimagining of human rights in the academy.

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Introduction

Interdisciplinarity is something of a buzzword in contemporary academia. In relation to research and teaching on rights and justice related issues, interdisciplinarity is frequently put forward as desirable – or even necessary – and is, for example, used in the marketing of postgraduate courses (see, for example, Short 2015; University of Sussex n.d.-a). However, in practice there are severe limits placed upon those who seek to work across or beyond disciplines as they have been established and entrenched in the academy (Sayer 1999, 2000; Miller 2017; Waitere et al. 2011: 214). Indeed, ‘[i]n the concept “discipline”, there is... ambiguity in that it both refers to the distinct forms of knowledge as we conceive them and to the action of bringing about obedience’ (Grant 1997: 107). Reflecting upon the experience of teaching and researching human rights in university settings, this article explores the tensions inherent in pursuing interdisciplinarity, especially the ways in which power relations in the academy are manifested in such a way as to limit the intellectual horizons of – and in a sense punish – academics and students. In response to this, the central claim of this article is that a move towards postdisciplinarity in human rights – and, perhaps, more broadly – is desirable.

Before moving on, it is also worth briefly setting out here the distinction between the multidisciplinary, the interdisciplinary and the postdisciplinary. Multidisciplinarity refers to the ways in which the same topics might be addressed in different (but potentially complementary) ways according to the various methods and foci of
different disciplines (see, for example, Miller 2017). This would mean looking at an issue from one disciplinary perspective (such as law) and, separately but adding to this, from one or more other disciplinary perspectives (such as politics or philosophy) (Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005). Interdisciplinarity refers more to thinking across disciplines, addressing topics through methods and approaches which overlap with the perspectives and foci of multiple areas (Miller 2017; Sayer 1999, 2000). This would mean looking at an issue from a perspective which combines elements of more than one discipline, such as law and politics together (Miller 2017; Sayer 1999, 2000; Max-Neef 2005). Postdisciplinarity – which this article advocates – looks beyond the established boundaries of disciplines, considering topics more holistically, and applying methods and approaches with a view to answering interesting or important questions regardless of the degree to which these are considered to be the focus of one or more disciplines (see, for example, Sayer 1999, 2000; Jessop and Sum 2001). This would mean the choice of analytical tools being guided by the questions raised by an issue or topic rather than questions being guided by the established scope of (even multiple or combined) disciplinary tools (Sayer 1999, 2000).

Alternative typologies include terms such as the ‘crossdisciplinary’ (distinguished from the multidisciplinary by ‘involv[ing] real interaction across the conventional disciplines’, and itself further divisible according to degree and variety of interaction across disciplines) and the ‘transdisciplinary’, which is closer (though, not quite identical) to the notion of the postdisciplinary put forward here (Miller 2017; see also Jessop and Sum 2001; Max-Neef 2005). In Miller’s (2017) words: ‘Transdisciplinary
approaches... involve articulated conceptual frameworks that seek to transcend the more limited world-views of the specialized conventional disciplines’. However, transdisciplinary approaches vary according to whether they supplement or replace existing conventional disciplines (Miller 2017; see also Manfred Max-Neef 2005: 7-9, arguing that transdisciplinarity can occur when multiple relations are established between perspectives addressing all four ‘levels’ from the ‘empirical’, to the ‘purposive or pragmatic’, the ‘normative’ and the ‘value level’). Postdisciplinarity of the sort advocated in this article has more in common with ‘discipline-replacement’ transdisciplinary approaches than those which supplement established disciplines (Miller 2017; Sayer 2000).

In the next section background is set out, explaining the methodological approach and motivation of the article. After this, interdisciplinarity in practice is discussed, considering what it might actually mean to pursue interdisciplinary teaching and research, and the implications of this. Following this, the article moves onto an exploration of disciplinary power and its relationship to punishment in the academy (drawing particularly on Foucault and a Foucauldian lens of analysis). This exploration leads onto consideration of the implications for teaching and research which emerge from engagement with the realities of interdisciplinarity in practice, and its relationship to power and punishment in the academy. It is suggested that a postdisciplinary reimagining of human rights might offer a resolution to the tensions identified in the article. However, there are nevertheless barriers to pursuing this. As such, in the final, concluding, section, questions are raised with regard to what kind
of scholarship is possible within the academy as it currently exists and regarding the extent to which change is possible.

Background

Methodologically, this article is primarily reflective of personal experience, arguably comprising autoethnography, with all the advantages and limitations this presents (see, for example, Miettinen 2000; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Hobbs 2007; Méndez 2013; Denshire 2013; Wall 2008; Delamont 2007). Reflections, which are put forward below, are contextualised and related to findings from the scholarly literature and wider sources of data relating to (inter)disciplinarity, particularly in human rights. The article is motivated by, and reflects upon, the experience of teaching and researching human rights and related areas since around 2010. This experience is shaped by and intertwined with the experience of studying – and, subsequently, teaching – across multiple disciplines (and interdisciplinary programmes). The major contribution to the field made by the article comes out of bringing these experiences together in a rigorous interrogation of their meaning and implications. These implications are significant for the study and practice of human rights. They are, moreover, significant for the structuring of the academy, and of the means by which teaching and research are pursued more broadly. The aims of the article are severalfold. First, to provide an account of the lived experience of a teacher and researcher working across (and beyond) multiple established academic disciplines. Second, to link this to a critique of both the limitations (and distortions) of mainstream
human rights scholarship and practice, and the ways these are intertwined with the operation of disciplinary power and neoliberal processes in the academy. Third, to explore ways of responding to these processes and limitations from the perspective of someone embroiled in and affected by them, and as a provocation to others likewise situated to reflect and respond.

The key themes with which this article is concerned emerge out of reflection upon experiences going back a number of years, from undergraduate to postgraduate study and into professional academic practice. Having completed a first degree in English and Philosophy (which also included elective modules in other subjects), a master’s degree in Applied Human Rights and a PhD in Politics (based in the same interdisciplinary centre as the master’s programme), and having taught law, politics, international relations, sociology and several other subjects, a consistent question haunts research and teaching: What kind of thing is this? Sometimes the question is explicit (it is frequently necessary for scholars to self-define in disciplinary terms) but even when it is not asked outright, the question remains (see also Sayer 2000 on the ways in which interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary scholars are ‘disciplined’ through university structures and through the perceptions of others). Is this scholarship, teaching or research really doing law, or politics, or sociology, or international relations (or another discipline) in (what is perceived to be) the correct way? Who decides, and what are the implications of deciding that some teaching or research does not meet the expectations of one discipline or another? On the face of it, there is, for example, a contradiction between the university webpage’s listing of subject
area (‘Law’) and the description used by the Library of Congress (‘Political scientist’) 
(see University of Sussex n.d.-b; [XXXX] 2018: iv). Likewise, during the first year of PhD 
study, it was necessary to explain and argue in defence of not attending (after the first 
session) non-accredited PhD skills workshops on legal research hosted by the law 
school whilst simultaneously being required by the politics department to attend 
accredited master’s-level modules on ‘Political Research and Analysis’ and ‘Personal 
and Professional Skills’ (and also carrying out paid teaching and research work). 
Indeed, one clear example of the requirements of scholars to self-define in disciplinary 
terms is evident in the fact that applications for PhD study in this centre (unlike for its 
interdisciplinary master’s programmes) must follow the procedures of either the law 
school or politics department (determined in part by supervisor’s departmental 
location – faculty must also be affiliated to a department). In the sections that follow 
the article reflects upon these, and related questions, first turning to consideration of 
interdisciplinarity in practice.

**Interdisciplinarity in practice**

It is common for university courses on human rights to stress interdisciplinarity (for 
example, University of Sussex n.d.-a). Likewise, the major journals, books series and 
other outlets for the publication of research frequently acknowledge and encourage 
interdisciplinarity. This is a good thing. Human rights cannot be fully understood 
through any single disciplinary lens (see, for example, Martin 1987; Steiner 2002; 
Gready 2003; Krain and Nurse 2004; Stammers 2009; O'Byrne 2014; Short 2015;
Hammond 2016). Whilst this is not an especially controversial position, it is also the case that there are limits on the degree to which interdisciplinarity in human rights research and teaching is actually pursued in practice. Scholars are constrained with regard to what they can teach and research, and the ways in which they can do this. Some of these constraints are formal, but many are informal – or, at least, subtle (see, for example, Sayer 2000; Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005). The next section discusses the operation of disciplinary power in the academy in more detail. Here, however, it is worth exploring some of the factors affecting interdisciplinarity in the practice of human rights research and teaching. This exploration particularly draws on experience, contextualising this with reference to the relevant literatures. Whilst the exploration here reflects particularly on human rights, many of the issues raised could equally be applied to interdisciplinarity more generally.

Key factors promoting and limiting interdisciplinarity are buy-in from powerful gatekeepers (such as government and funding bodies), as well as the established structures of academia in relation to the departments and disciplinary units teaching takes place within, the qualifications it contributes towards and the environment in which research is published and measured (see, for example, Griffin 2015; Sayer 2000; Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005; Evans 2006). Upon beginning an interdisciplinary master’s degree in human rights in 2009, for instance, the director of the centre hosting the programme remarked to the new students during a welcome event that
he was virtually unemployable outside of such an interdisciplinary centre. At the time this seemed to be a somewhat frivolous, light-hearted remark. In retrospect, it seems more like a damning indictment of the state of academia. As Raymond C Miller (2017) notes, ‘[a]dvocating explicitly for interdisciplinary approaches in a discipline-controlled environment can be risky. It can be politically risky for administrative units and personally risky for faculty, especially for junior faculty’. This is in part because ‘[i]n the double meaning of discipline lies the power/knowledge clinch in which particular knowledge claims, in being legitimated as truth, are thus always underpinned and guaranteed by power relations’ (Grant 1997: 107).

In the more than 15 years since Paul Gready (2003) decried the marginal position of politics in the ways in which students and scholars approach understandings of human rights some things have changed, but not that many, and not that much. Law often continues to dominate human rights as a field of study, even in ostensibly interdisciplinary contexts (see, for instance, Short 2015: 7; Banki, Valiente-Riedl and Duffill 2013: 320). Moreover, law is the most commonly listed disciplinary area for courses found in a keyword search for ‘human rights’ on FindAMasters.com (386 of the 852 courses – just over 45%), with politics and government the disciplinary area with the next most results (at 312 – just under 37%) (FindAMasters n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). The impression that law frequently dominates the study of human rights is also reinforced in perusal of relevant books and journals: for instance, all of the

1 Remarks made in October 2009 by Paul Gready at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, York.
contributors to *Examining Critical Perspectives on Human Rights* are based in law schools (Dickinson et al. 2012), and 14 of the 23 contributors to the May 2019 issue (the most recent at the time of writing) of the interdisciplinary human rights journal, *Human Rights Quarterly*, are based in law (including one contributor pursuing both law JD and politics PhD degrees) (Human Rights Quarterly 2019), which is to say nothing of the number of (or disciplinary makeup of contributors to) journals which are specifically focused on human rights law (of which there are many), rather than interdisciplinary approaches to human rights. Susan Banki, Elisabeth Valiente-Riedl and Paul Duffill, for instance, note that in Australian journal rankings for 2012, 21 of the 25 human rights journals listed were ‘coded as law journals’ (Banki, Valiente-Riedl and Duffill 2013: 320). Leading textbooks are frequently similarly disciplined, often either flagging up a focus on law or (less frequently) international relations from the title onwards, such as in the cases of *International Human Rights Law* (Moeckli, Shah and Sivakumaran 2017) and *Human Rights in International Relations* (Forsythe 2018), or providing a narrow disciplinary focus once past the cover, such as in the *Textbook on International Human Rights*, which is ‘intended to serve as a broad introduction to International Human Rights Law’ (Smith 2016: xiii; emphasis added).

Moreover, human rights teaching is frequently required to fit within the bounds of a particular disciplinary or departmental home (often law). Peter Rosenblum (2002: 315), for example, reflecting on human rights teaching, argues that the ‘first generation’ of human rights teaching ‘had to prove the relevance of the field’ to law schools and law students ‘[i]n order to secure a place in the curriculum’. Likewise,
Darren O’Byrne (2014: 67) notes that ‘the issue of academic disciplinarity is challenging for the teacher and learner of human rights’, in part because ‘each component discipline may feel it has a legitimate case to make for “owning” the concept’ (see also Pritchard 1989; Hammond 2016). Indeed, recently, in designing a module on socioeconomic rights for delivery to master’s students (in a UK law school) it was not only necessary to include the word ‘law’ in the module’s name for it to be approved for delivery, it was also necessary to adapt and apply heavily law-focused learning objectives from the overall degree programme. Whilst the module is interdisciplinary, the requirement to fit it within the expectations of a law master’s delivered in a law school have shaped its contents – and the means by which it is assessed – somewhat (see University of Sussex 2019; see also Griffin 2015; Evans 2006). Conversely, several years earlier, in designing and delivering an interdisciplinary postgraduate module on human rights at a different institution (covering some of the same topics and material) it was necessary to meet the requirements of a (South African) politics department. Indeed, this module had to use the placeholder name ‘Selected Topics in Political Studies’, and was not offered to law students or others outside the unit within which it was based.

In another context (at yet another institution – in the UK), teaching for several years running on an interdisciplinary undergraduate option module (designed and convened by someone else), on humanitarianism, armed conflict and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, which was administratively hosted by a law school but open to politics (and a few other) students, it was frequently necessary to counter
the assumptions – and attempt to allay the fears – of students as they related to disciplinary expectations (in the UK it is typical for undergraduate degree programmes to be focused on a single discipline, or sometimes two – and much less frequently, three – throughout what is usually a three year course of study, with students selecting a degree in either law or politics, or another discipline, at the point of application). Politics students frequently expressed fear that they would be disadvantaged as the module was in their view really in the discipline of law, whereas law students frequently expressed fear that they would be disadvantaged as the module was in their view really in the discipline of politics. It was not always easy to persuade students that the module was in fact not strictly either law or politics, and that this was both deliberate and had been taken into account in the design and delivery of the teaching and assessments. Despite the popularity of the module, myths were also pervasive, with false claims circulating amongst students that no-one had achieved the highest grades in previous years, and that either law or politics students (depending upon the particular rumour’s source) had received disproportionately lower grades than the other disciplinary group.

Teaching on another interdisciplinary – but law school-hosted – undergraduate human rights option module at the same institution also threw up a bizarre quirk at one time. The different requirements of the degree programmes hosted by the law and politics departments meant that all the law students took a shortened version of the module, leaving half way through the year, whilst the politics students continued for the full year. For a full teaching term, the module did not include any law students
– despite it being administratively hosted in the law school. In addition to being strange, this meant that law students missed out on the opportunity to study the topics covered in the second half of the module, and both the law students who had to leave and the remaining politics students missed out on the benefits of learning alongside, and in dialogue with, those coming from a different disciplinary background to their own. Some of the risks and difficulties of interdisciplinarity identified by Miller (2017) are reflected in the experiences recounted above.

Elizabeth Ann Griffin (2015) notes in her reflection on human rights education in law schools that whilst the core of law degrees must be law, that human rights teaching necessitates some attention being paid to other areas (for example, Griffin 2015: 32). She also notes that her reflections are confined to human rights law teaching and would not necessarily apply in the same way to human rights teaching in other disciplines (Griffin 2015, 19-20) – Rosenblum’s (2002) reflection on related dilemmas is similarly focused on human rights teaching in a law school, as is Rhona Smith’s (2013) reflection on embedding research into human rights teaching. Taken together these two points highlight both the possibilities and limitations of interdisciplinarity in human rights in the academy. As Henry J Steiner (2002: 318) argues, ‘human rights work should not be imprisoned within different disciplines’ boundaries but should often adopt an interdisciplinary approach’. Nevertheless, ‘each university faculty involved in this enterprise will have its own dominant orientation influencing the content of teaching and research’ (Steiner 2002: 318; see also Hung 2014). This, furthermore, influences the ways in which teaching is evaluated and measured. As
Carolyn Evans (2006) notes, the multiple different ways of interpreting human rights and the multiple different purposes of human rights education mean that evaluation and assessment of human rights teaching can be especially complex – and, potentially, problematic. Indeed, ‘[m]ore often than not, it is not the teachers or the students who restrict the content of a human rights class to clearly defined disciplinary approaches, but the enforced inflexibility of the disciplines themselves, bound up as they so often are in the language of subject benchmarks, curriculum aims and learning outcomes, quality assurance indicators, and professional standards’ (O’Byrne 2014: 69).

On the one hand, in an area such as human rights it is seen as necessary to engage in interdisciplinarity (Steiner 2002; Short 2015). On the other hand, scholarship and teaching – including on human rights – remains divided by discipline. This brings a tension into focus. Those who study (or teach) human rights are constrained by the (disciplinary and broader) environment in which this takes place (some examples of these constraints are recalled above; see also Evans 2006; O’Byrne 2014). Interdisciplinarity is considered acceptable – desirable or necessary, even – only up to a point. Straying too far from the accepted core of a particular home discipline has consequences (see Miller 2017). Consider, for instance, the ways in which Aoife Nolan and Evelyne Schmid assert a particular (legal positivist) understanding of human rights as authoritative and dismiss non-legal scholarly contributions (Schmid and Nolan 2014; discussed further in Evans 2019a; more broadly, see Sayer 2000 on disciplinary ‘parochialism’ and ‘imperialism’). O’Byrne (2019), similarly, notes that much philosophically-oriented literature on human rights fails to take account of
sociological approaches and contributions to the same aspects of the subject. These disciplining tendencies are also experienced in the processes of scholarly peer review. For example, relatively recently, in the process of submitting (and eventually publishing) a piece on reconciliation and transitional justice in an international politics journal, one reviewer questioned the relevance of the topic to the journal’s disciplinary focus. Consequently, it was necessary to add in material explaining why transitional justice and reconciliation are relevant to the (sub)discipline of international politics, rather than only being of concern to other disciplines, such as law. It was necessary to make these changes to the article despite the fact that within the field (or, perhaps, ‘non-field’), transitional justice is widely seen as inherently interdisciplinary, with international relations, politics and law as just some of the relevant disciplinary areas (see, for example, Bell 2009). These tendencies contribute to the reasons this article advocates a shift towards postdisciplinarity. Moreover, as explored in the next section, the structures and practices of the university can limit the scope for interdisciplinarity.

Power and punishment in the academy

For all the rhetoric surrounding interdisciplinarity’s benefits in the academy, it is also the case that interdisciplinarity is punished. The exercise of disciplinary power, through ‘surveillance’ and measurement, ensures this (see Foucault 1980: 104). The established practices of teaching and researching in academic disciplines feed into this (Sayer 2000). Foucault notes that ‘[t]here has... probably been an ideology of
education’ but also that “[i]t is both much more and much less than ideology. It is the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge – methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control’ (Foucault 1980: 102). The methods and techniques of specialised academic disciplines contribute to defining the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable modes of teaching and research (Sayer 2000; Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005; also Evans 2006). This feeds into the ways in which the academy is structured hierarchically. Moreover, even “[i]nterdisciplinary studies are not enough, for at worst they provide a space in which members of different disciplines can bring their points of view together in order to compete behind a thin disguise of cooperation’ (Sayer 1999: 5; see also Max-Neef 2005). In part for this reason, a move towards postdisciplinarity is advocated here. Indeed, lessons from Foucault’s analysis of military structures can also be applied to academia.

Distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: It marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards. It is the penal functioning of setting in order and the ordinal character of judging. Discipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process. Rank in itself serves as a reward or punishment (Foucault 1995: 181).

University-based scholars are assigned titles (and paygrades) indicating the degree (or lack) of seniority they possess within institutional hierarchies. Their teaching and research are measured, categorised and ranked, and reward or punishment (for instance through access to or denial of promotion or resources such as funding...
streams or research leave) distributed accordingly. Moreover, ‘in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating’ (Foucault 1995: 303). Educating students, and training and socialising scholars into the norms of academic disciplines and structures, (re)produces power structures which punish transgression (see, for example, Grant 1997; also Max-Neef 2005). This has implications both within and beyond the academy. Some of these are explored in the paragraphs which follow, first considering the measurement and categorisation of research and publications, then discussing teaching and the ways this influences practice.

Through measuring exercises such as the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) the disciplining of academia produces something (in a sense) desirable – at least to universities’ strategic interests and possibly in relation to (some) individual scholars’ career advancement (see, for example, McCulloch 2017; also Grant and Elizabeth 2015; Waitere et al. 2011). Research and teaching (and academics as individuals) are categorised, measured and ranked: REF scores are linked to direct funding, as well as to ‘rankings and league tables, which in turn affect an institution’s ability to raise income from tuition fees’ (McCulloch 2017). Therefore, ‘most universities and departments have policies in place to encourage their academic staff to produce work likely to score highly in the REF’ (McCulloch 2017). Nevertheless, whilst departmental means of evaluating academics’ research pegged to these measures are frequently described by heads of department as ‘ways of “rewarding” good publications’, scholars often see ‘this performance management as something closer to a threat
than a reward’ (McCulloch 2017; see also Dahler-Larsen 2017; Grant and Elizabeth 2015; Morrish 2017). For instance, ‘strategic behaviour’ to meet targets is common (McCulloch 2017). This both ‘enable[s] academics to meet their targets’ and leads to them ‘pa[y]ing] a high price for this in terms of their sense of disciplinary identity’ (McCulloch 2017). Departments’ strategies for being highly-ranked in the REF’s units of assessment, which are divided by discipline, feed into this (there are 34 disciplinary units of assessment, divided between four ‘Main Panel[s]’) (see REF 2021: Research Excellence Framework 2019). What kind of research scholars carry out and where they seek to publish is influenced by the discipline to which they are assigned and the expectations of university power-holders with regard to this (see, for example, Miller 2017). Sharon McCulloch (2017) discusses this phenomenon, giving the example of a marketing scholar ‘publishing her research in journals outside of her disciplinary area’ which ‘enabled her to maximize the prospects of career advancement’, but also ‘gave her something of an identity crisis about who she was as a scholar’. Indeed, it has been further argued that in academia the ‘dubiously derived metric[s]’ (Soo Tian 2018: 17) used to monitor and measure performance lead to the possibility that scholars ‘can be penalised more or less randomly for personal or political reasons’ (Dahler-Larsen 2017; see also Morrish 2017; Evans 2006). Liz Morrish (2017), for example, notes the increasing trend of scholars facing capability-based disciplinary action, and the possibility of losing their jobs, because of their performance (or perceived potential to perform) in such measurement exercises. She also notes that some scholars (including herself) choose to leave the academy in the face of these measuring, disciplining tendencies (Morrish 2017).
In relation to human rights in particular, there is the potential for the means by which teaching and research are measured to be applied (possibly inconsistently) in such a way that interdisciplinary scholars are punished (by being frustrated in attempts to maintain or advance their ranking or grade position within disciplinary professional hierarchies) for not conforming to narrow disciplinary norms in their scholarly work (Dahler-Larsen 2017; Sayer 2000; Miller 2017; Waitere et al. 2011; Evans 2006). For consciously interdisciplinary scholars publishing strategies present a particular dilemma, and with regard to human rights in particular, questions are raised as to which REF unit of assessment would be the better fit, and – importantly – whether this aligns with the strategy chosen by the department measuring and ranking research (see, for example, Miller 2017). Should human rights research be submitted to the unit of assessment for ‘Law’, ‘Politics and International Studies’, ‘Sociology’ or ‘Anthropology and Development Studies’ – or for the unit of assessment for ‘Area Studies’ or ‘Philosophy’ (or somewhere else) (see REF 2021: Research Excellence Framework 2019)? Should human rights scholars submit their work to specialist interdisciplinary human rights journals, or to disciplinary journals in law, politics, sociology, anthropology, international relations, philosophy and so on?

Interdisciplinary (including human rights) scholars must contend with the fact that their research may not be judged favourably according to the terms by which it is measured in the departments in which they are based (McCulloch 2017; Sayer 1999;
Miller 2017). Similar issues are present with regard to teaching (Evans 2006). O’Byrne (2014: 73), for example, argues that ‘meaningful human rights education is unlikely to survive... in the current climate in which university “success” is measured in terms of market forces rather than critical self-reflection’. Consequently, when the ranks and rewards based on such measurement are distributed, interdisciplinary scholars may be punished (Miller 2017; Waitere et al. 2011: 214). This could be extended to a wider criticism of measures such as the REF (see, for example, Dahler-Larsen 2017; McCulloch 2017; Grant and Elizabeth 2015; Morrish 2017), but these issues are particularly pronounced in interdisciplinary work. Miller (2017), for instance, notes that the authors of a 2014 report on interdisciplinarity commissioned by the American Political Science Association ‘placed a major emphasis on discipline-based peer review’, contending that ‘peer review is credible only if it comes from an established discipline’. Miller (2017) argues that this emphasis was made ‘in order to ensure that none of this interdisciplinary teaching and research endangers the institutional power of the conventional disciplines’. Even if this was not the report authors’ intention, it is certainly likely to be the effect. One might wonder which discipline these authors would deem to be credible for the peer review of human rights scholarship. Moreover, as Miller (2017) notes, a focus on disciplinary peer review even for interdisciplinary work is ‘self-serving at the very least’ as ‘one of the main reasons for engaging in truly innovative interdisciplinary activity is to break free of the narrow, restrictive, and presumably inadequate contexts of the established disciplines’. The difficulty in breaking free of these contexts in relation to human rights research and teaching is explored further in the paragraphs below.
The fact that human rights research and teaching frequently takes place in law schools, combined with the fact that programmes recognised as qualifying law degrees (in the UK) must meet particular requirements in terms of subject content and topics covered limits the potential for interdisciplinarity, and (in a sense) punishes those who pursue it. The experiences in teaching law school-hosted human rights modules, discussed above, can be considered in relation to this. Whilst the UK undergraduate qualifying law degree does not have an analogue in all education systems, the fact that qualification for legal practice typically involves university study which must meet particular requirements for professional accreditation means it is likely that these experiences can be applied more broadly. Furthermore, it is common for teaching jobs in UK law schools to require postholders to be qualified as lawyers themselves or to have experience of the core foundational subjects of the qualifying law degree. This means that scholars with interdisciplinary (or simply non-law) backgrounds pursuing human rights (or other interdisciplinary) research and teaching are less likely to be employed in the university departments where much human rights research takes place (and thus where the field, including its disciplinary norms, is shaped). This is reflected in the experience of applying and interviewing for such positions and receiving feedback to this effect when unsuccessful (which is to say, frequently) (see also Griffin 2015 on the dilemmas of balancing legal, theoretical and practical content in postgraduate teaching on international human rights law, Sayer 2000 on the constraints of disciplines more broadly, and Miller 2017 on the risks attached to pursuing interdisciplinarity). This is not, furthermore, simply a problem
regarding law. The absorption of human rights into any single discipline – whether law or international relations or philosophy or something else – presents similar problems (in part this is why this article advocates a move towards postdisciplinarity).

Pursuing interdisciplinary human rights work in this context is then made doubly difficult. First, there is the problem of getting through the door if many departments and institutions require (or strongly prefer) discipline-specific qualifications (such as being a qualified lawyer). Then, once through the door, there is the problem of fitting interdisciplinary work into the framework of departments and institutions which may be under external pressure to maintain primary focus on meeting narrow disciplinary requirements (such as for the qualifying law degree), and which have been shaped internally by self-reproducing disciplinary norms which are resistant to change (see, for example, Steiner’s note regarding the influence each university department’s ‘dominant orientation’ has upon teaching and research, Steiner 2002: 318; see also Sayer 2000; Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005; Evans 2006; Smith 2013). To reiterate, this is not an issue which manifests only in law schools or only in the UK. Dominant orientations within disciplines vary with geography (Miller 2017; Hung 2014). Nevertheless, wherever the departments are located, international relations and other disciplines within which human rights teaching and research is sometimes housed also have their own disciplinary norms and expectations with regard to the areas which scholars ought to have qualifications and experience, and the approaches that ought to be taken in their specialisms (see, for example, Steiner 2002; Griffin 2015; Miller 2017; O’Byrne 2014; Pritchard 1989). Attendance at the 2019 annual
convention of the (US-based and heavily international relations-oriented) International Studies Association (ISA), where an earlier version of this article was presented, served as a reminder of this. Miller (2017), similarly notes that there was an ‘implicit assumption’ in the ISA’s past procedure for reviewing the draft programme of its annual convention (including by heads of interdisciplinary sections such as women’s studies and peace studies) ‘that all ISA members were political scientists’ despite this being ‘contradictory to the organization’s own mission statement’. This can promote what Andrew Sayer (1999: 2) calls ‘disciplinary parochialism’, where scholars become ‘incapable of seeing beyond the questions posed by their own discipline, which provide an all-purpose filter for everything’. It can also lead to the related phenomenon of ‘disciplinary imperialism’ where disciplinary scholars ‘attempt to claim territories occupied by others as their own’ (Sayer 1999: 2; see also Jessop and Sum 2001: 92).

With regard to practice (and the overlaps this has with scholarship), the phenomena discussed above have potentially limiting effects. One of these effects is the production of narrow, specialised (and parochial), professionalised fields of practice. In human rights this produces tensions and dilemmas in relation to the overlap between scholarship and activism (see Griffin 2015; also Evans 2019b; Rosenblum 2002; Kestenbaum, Hoyos-Ceballos and del Aguila Talvadkar 2012). Professionalisation forms part of the ‘paradox of institutionalisation’, whereby social movement articulation and deployment of human rights in informal mobilisation leads to – and is to some extent co-opted and constrained by – formal recognition of
and top-down legitimation of (at least some) movement demands (Stammers 1999: 999; also Stammers 2009; Hammond 2016; on the institutionalisation of human rights education, see also Suarez 2006). Professionalisation and institutionalisation can, further, lead to the production of ‘professional intellectuals’ – as opposed to ‘amateur intellectuals’ (see Said 1996). Applying these concepts, it has been argued that punishment in the academy occurs when scholars act in a way which is perceived as undisciplined – or uncivil (when they act as ‘amateur’, rather than ‘professional’ intellectuals) (see Reynolds 2016; on civility, see, further, Seymour 2019, arguing that ‘[c]ivility has always been inseparable from status, deference and obedience’ and Newkirk 2018, positing that ‘demands for civility function primarily to stifle the frustrations of those currently facing real harm’ and that ‘protest is not often civil’; see also, Lettinga and Kaulingfreks 2015 on the relationships – and tensions – between institutionalised human rights advocacy and ‘unruly’ activisms).

There is the possibility that scholars (or practitioners for that matter) will be (professionally or personally) punished if they engage with human rights issues outside the confines of (especially, their own) professionalised, institutionalised – and parochial – disciplinary platforms, or outside the modes of behaviour characterised as sufficiently ‘civil’ (or ‘professional’) by those more dominant in institutional and disciplinary power relations. In this regard, consider, for example, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s treatment of Stephen Salaitam, who ‘lost his job, essentially, over the positions he took publicly during Israel’s summer [2014] war on Gaza’ (Reynolds 2016: 2101). Punitive treatment of Salaitam focused on the idea that
his behaviour (particularly, describing an Israel Defense Forces spokesperson as a ‘lying motherfucker’ on Twitter) was ‘uncivil’ (see Reynolds 2016).

More broadly, Cameron De Chi (2016) has noted that there has been ‘an attempt by the establishment to rewrite the rules of politics and shame anger at politicians out of public discourse’. One might consider this, and the above discussion of civility, in light of the prominent human rights lawyer Adam Wagner’s response to the journalist Abi Wilkinson in relation to her criticism (also on Twitter) of Times columnist and Conservative member of the House of Lords Danny Finkelstein. Wilkinson had criticised Finkelstein’s involvement with – including past board-membership of – the notoriously racist, far-right Gatestone Institute (Wilkinson 2018; see also Ahmed 2015, 2018). Wagner argued that Wilkinson terming Finkelstein a ‘racist scumbag’ due to his close association with Gatestone was a ‘bullying’ and ‘abusive’ – and therefore unacceptable – way to describe the ‘unerringly polite’ Finkelstein (who he also described as ‘one of the good guys’) (Wagner 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). By contrast, De Chi (2016) argues that ‘we need stop trying to sweep anger under the rug and claiming that will make things better. We need to start trying to fix what’s really broken’.

Regardless of the degree to which law is limited by institutionalisation and professionalisation (including with regard to norms of civility), in defending the centrality of law to the kinds of human rights education she is involved in, Griffin notes that ‘[l]egal knowledge underpins many forms of advocacy’ (Griffin 2015: 32).
Stammers (2009) also notes the importance of legal approaches to much human rights advocacy. However, he argues that a disproportionate focus on the law contributes to the ‘distorted’ conception of human rights in much mainstream scholarship and practice (Stammers 2009: 8). Reading Griffin’s account through the lens of Stammers’s critique is instructive. Legal knowledge is important for much human rights advocacy. This importance is in part maintained and extended through the reproduction of mainstream conceptions of human rights which (implicitly or explicitly) posit that legal knowledge ought to be more important than other aspects of human rights (see, for example, Schmid and Nolan 2014). Disciplinary parochialism and imperialism are evident in this trend (see Sayer, 1999, 2000; also Jessop and Sum 2001). In turn, this contributes to the production and institutionalisation (and in a Foucauldian sense, governing) of the right and wrong ways of ‘doing’ human rights in practice (see, for example Sokhi-Bulley 2011, 2016). If it is accepted that legal knowledge ought to be more important than other aspects of human rights, this reinforces the notion that the right approach to human rights is for professionalised nongovernmental organisations and law firms to pursue institutionalised engagement with the state and intergovernmental organisations through strategies such as lobbying and strategic litigation (see, for example Sokhi-Bulley 2011, 2016; also Stammers 2009; Carrillo and Espejo Yaksic 2011). These trends in practice are influenced by human rights education. This relationship is explored next.

Both human rights education (including in universities) and human rights practice (especially in its institutionalised forms) can contribute to the reproduction of
distorted mainstream conceptions (see Stammers 2009; Griffin 2015; Rosenblum 2002; see also Kennedy 2002). As Stammers (2009: 11) notes, ‘the fact that practitioners outside the academy have been trained within particular disciplines means they are also likely to take the assumptions of “their” discipline out into the wider world’. If human rights teaching (explicitly or implicitly) promotes the idea that the correct way of doing human rights practice is through a narrow set of approaches, such as those centring primarily on legal professionals interacting formally with states and intergovernmental organisations, then other approaches may remain marginalised (see, for example, Stammers 2009: 22-23). This is not to say that alternative understandings are never present within the academy, including within law as a discipline. There is, for instance, a significant body of critical legal scholarship on human rights (see, for example, Kennedy 2002; Douzinas 2002; Dickinson et al. 2012; Sokhi-Bulley 2016). However, much of this does not do a great deal to challenge the ways in which the academy is disciplined (in the sense of being divided into the disciplines – and disciplinary expectations – of law, politics, sociology and so on). Critical legal theory is, after all, an established (if minority) field within legal theory, itself within the discipline of law (Sokhi-Bulley 2013).

All too often engagement with human rights in critical legal theory reinforces the established disciplinary bounds of human rights by providing a critique only of narrow, mainstream conceptions of and approaches to human rights, or provides a critique based on empirically questionable assumptions about human rights praxis (see, for example, Stammers 2015: 76 and Stammers 2009 on what he terms ‘uncritical critics’
of human rights – also O’Byrne 2019; Rosenblum 2002; see also Hilary Charlesworth 2002, directly responding to David Kennedy 2002). Of course, much critical legal theory does address the need for ‘alternative methodologies’ in law (see, for example, Sokhi-Bulley 2013). However, disciplinary parochialism and disciplinary imperialism can again be seen in this (Sayer 1999, 2000; Jessop and Sum 2001). Calling for alternative methodologies in law maintains a disciplinary focus on law, bringing other areas – or the methods and methodologies of other disciplines – into law for the purpose of advancing law’s disciplinary aims (disciplinary parochialism), for instance by focusing on the ways that knowledge of these methodologies ‘provides [students] with the skills they need to be successful lawyers’ (even if they are not ‘docile’ lawyers) (Sokhi-Bulley 2013: 11, 17-19). Likewise, it assumes that the limitations of law’s (dominant) methodologies can be overcome in such a way that law as a discipline is able to (better) confront a wide and growing range of phenomena (including human rights) (Sohki-Bulley 2013: 15), with (possibly ‘alternative’) legal methodologies the appropriate lenses through which these should be confronted (disciplinary imperialism).

**Implications for teaching and research**

The discussion set out above raises a number of questions, the asking and answering of which have implications for human rights teaching and research (and, indeed, for practice). First and foremost, with regard to human rights, law is not enough. Law is not enough in the analysis of human rights and law is not enough in the practical
engagement with or pursuit of human rights (see, for example, Pritchard 1989; Banki, Valiente-Riedl and Duffill 2013). Nor, indeed, is any other single discipline. Interdisciplinarity is necessary – and is frequently recognised as such. However, recognition is not enough, and disciplinary constraints endure. This limits intellectual horizons and practical possibilities (see Sayer 2000). Within the academy, particular disciplinary approaches to human rights (and other issues) remain siloed and separated to some extent, with for instance, ethnographic studies of human rights activism frequently conducted in different departments to, and with little or no interaction with, those conducting doctrinal legal positivist work (see, for instance, Stammers 1999, 2009). In turn this produces and institutionalises (and governs) the right and wrong ways of ‘doing’ human rights in practice – as mentioned above, frequently this amounts to professionalised nongovernmental organisations pursuing changes in the law through institutionalised engagement (such as lobbying and strategic litigation) with the state and intergovernmental organisations (see, for example Sokhi-Bulley 2011, 2016; also Stammers 2009; Carrillo and Espejo Yaksic 2011).

In order to overcome these limitations a move towards postdisciplinarity is therefore invited (see, for example, Sayer 2000; Jessop and Sum 2001). This would mean pursuing ideas without regard for the established borders of disciplines (Sayer 2000). For human rights it would mean moving away from the idea that studies ought to have a home discipline in law or another discipline (even if the boundaries of this home are permeated by interdisciplinarity). It would mean that the design and delivery of
teaching was geared around questions of interest and the tools to address these, rather than around disciplinary tools (of law or international relations or something else) and the questions to which these are most readily turned. Indeed, as Sayer (2000) notes, one way in which postdisciplinarity can add value is by bringing greater coherence to areas of study precisely because conforming to disciplinary boundaries (even if they are stretched by interdisciplinarity) leads to the arbitrary division of phenomena into component elements which are then approached from particular disciplinary perspectives rather than holistically (see also Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005; O’Byrne 2014). Such a move could answer the questions raised by Griffin (2015) in such a way that her dilemmas – being specific to the international human rights law educator – might be resolved (or avoided altogether).

This is not, however, to suggest that human rights scholars ought to be masters of all disciplines, somehow specialising in everything. Nor is it to suggest that disciplinary work (in human rights or otherwise) does not have value (see Sayer 2000 for discussion of the value of disciplines and disciplinary work as well as a critique). Rather, in proposing a move towards postdisciplinarity in teaching and research on human rights, it is suggested that scholars and students have something to gain: greater coherence in the area of study and widening of intellectual horizons – and, by extension, of practical possibilities.
An alternative suggestion is to move (back) to predisciplinarity rather than to postdisciplinarity (Sayer 1999: 6). Predisciplinarity refers to the kind of work conducted ‘[b]efore the late nineteenth century’, when ‘the founders of social science would roam freely across territory we now see carefully fenced off into politics, psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy, etc. ... often [on] a single page’ (Sayer 1999: 6; see also Jessop and Sum 2001: 90). It has been suggested that predisciplinarity is preferable to postdisciplinarity. This is as predisciplinary work allows for the apprehension of power from whatever perspective necessary to understand its manifestations (whether economic, theological, military, sexual or otherwise), whereas postdisciplinarity is a reaction to the establishment, and fragmentation, of disciplines in the 20th century (thanks must go to Michael Kearney for this suggestion). This article, however, takes a view more in line with that of Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (2001: 89), that the proposed reimagining of teaching and research is ‘pre-disciplinary in its historical inspiration’ but ‘post-disciplinary in its current intellectual implications’. There is potential for ‘exciting developments’ to ‘involve the revival of pre-disciplinary approaches such as Marxism’ (Jessop and Sum 2001: 99), which initially emerged in an environment prior to the establishment and institutionalisation of academic disciplines – ‘a relatively recent phenomenon’, after all (Sayer 1999: 6; for two recent considerations of Marxism in relation to human rights in particular, see Bowring 2017 and O’Byrne 2019). There is also potential for ‘exciting developments’ to draw upon ‘the rise of post-disciplinary approaches’ (Jessop and Sum 2001: 99) which respond to and disrupt the established conventional disciplines through, for example, ‘discipline-replacement’ (Miller 2017). Jessop and
Sum particularly focus on the insights offered by cultural studies as a postdisciplinary field, as well as noting ‘the influence of intellectual figures with no clear disciplinary identity whose work is influential across many disciplines [such as] Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells, Michel Foucault, Nancy Fraser, Anthony Giddens, Stuart Hall, Donna Haraway, David Harvey, Jürgen Habermas, Ernesto Laclau, Karl Polanyi, Edward Said, Saskia Sassen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Iris Marion Young’ (Jessop and Sum 2001: 89-90), some of whom, of course, are cited in this piece. Sayer (1999, 2000) identifies several of the same intellectuals as postdisciplinary, and Miller (2017) also identifies both cultural studies and Marxism as examples of ‘discipline-replacement transdisciplinary approaches’. The post- in postdisciplinarity thusly conceived refers both to being after the establishment of conventional disciplines and to moving beyond these. This recognises the material fact of disciplines’ existence and power in the academy (and beyond) – the history of their establishment cannot be undone – whilst also seeking to ‘reject the discursive and organisational construction (and, worse, the fetishisation) of disciplinary boundaries’ (Jessop and Sum 2001: 89). In doing so, it is not only scholarship, which could be positively impacted by postdisciplinarity.

Postdisciplinarity in human rights might also impact positively upon practice. As discussed above, human rights practice is in part governed by disciplinary norms regarding the correct ways and the correct actors to be ‘doing’ human rights (often, lawyers, states and nongovernmental organisations) (see, for example Sokhi-Bulley 2011, 2016; Stammers 2009; Lettinga and Kaulingfreks 2015). The contention here is
that no particular set of approaches or actors is correct (see also Lettinga and Kaulingfreks 2015; O’Byrne 2014). Rather, those approaches and actors which have become mainstream or dominant, and those which have been excluded from the mainstream, ought to be interrogated, analysed and if necessary disrupted, adapted, abandoned, (re)incorporated or replaced through dynamic, critical – and postdisciplinary – engagement in theory and praxis. Moves towards postdisciplinarity in human rights might rupture the dominance of currently mainstream approaches (see, for example, Stammers 2009). In turn, this could lead to innovation and creativity in the manner in which human rights practice is understood and pursued. This is particularly important for human rights, as opposed to (at least some) other interdisciplinary, and potentially postdisciplinary, areas. This is because of the potential for human rights to be mobilised as challenges to power (see, for example, Stammers 2009). There is good reason for thinking such challenges to power should not be confined to spaces outside of the academy, not least because of the impact human rights teaching and scholarship has upon the forms and approaches taken in human rights practice. If distortions in mainstream conceptions of human rights are to be challenged it is necessary to challenge disciplinary parochialism and imperialism in human rights (Stammers 2009; Sayer 1999, 2000; Jessop and Sum 2001). A move towards postdisciplinarity in human rights is, therefore, particularly desirable.

Conclusion
In putting forward conclusions here, some of the implications of – and further questions raised by – the discussion set out above are explored. First and foremost, postdisciplinarity in human rights is desirable. However, the question remains as to whether (or to what extent) a move towards postdisciplinarity is actually possible (in research, in teaching, in practice). There is a danger that a prescription for postdisciplinarity amounts to an impossible utopia, taking insufficient account of the actual existence of disciplines and disciplinary power (Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005). Postdisciplinarity suggests a radical reimagining of approaches to scholarship (Sayer 2000; also Jessop and Sum 2001). It goes beyond the application of multiple different disciplinary tools and approaches to a topic (multidisciplinarity) and beyond the application of approaches combining different disciplinary tools (interdisciplinarity) (Miller 2017; Max-Neef 2005; Sayer 1999, 2000). Postdisciplinarity suggests that inquiry should be guided by the questions raised and the application of the necessary tools to these, rather than being guided by (even multiple or combined) disciplinary tools and the application of these to questions they might be able to (at least in part) answer (Sayer 1999, 2000). This is (to say the least) a challenging endeavour. Nevertheless, even naming the problem is one step towards a possible solution.

Moreover, for all that disciplinary power operates within the academy, the norms which govern human rights (and other) scholarship are not so rigid that change is impossible. Communities of practice and intellectual-cum-political movements do emerge, which – even if they do not fully rewrite the script according to which scholars (and practitioners) perform – can have real and meaningful impacts upon scholarship
and practice (see, for example, Noterman and Pusey 2012). It is also important to be wary of the potential for the desire for perfection to become the enemy of the good (see, for example, Gready 2010: 188). In this regard, then, it may be concluded that moves towards postdisciplinarity are a good, if imperfect, thing. Even as the ‘university as it currently exists, is clearly not an institution of our own making’ (Noterman and Pusey 2012: 180), scholars can to some extent resist the political rationale of neoliberal education and the disciplining tendencies which come with this – ‘cracks’ do exist (Holloway 2012), and shifts towards postdisciplinarity are one way in which these might be exposed, widened and deepened.

As Sayer (1999: 6) argues, ‘one of the reasons why the founders of social science were so good, is precisely [their] lack of disciplinary constraint or self-censorship, or disciplinary imperialism’. Indeed, ‘we might be better heirs if we shook off our disciplinary chains’ (Sayer 1999: 6). The challenge going forward is with regard to how moves towards postdisciplinarity might be made – how disciplinary chains may be shaken off and the spaces that exist for change (the cracks) might be built upon (Sayer 1999; Holloway 2012; Pusey 2017). One possible answer is collective and large scale. Another is more small scale and more – but not entirely – individualised. The former may be preferable, but the latter is perhaps more achievable – at least in the short term (see, for example, Grant and Elizabeth 2015).
With regard to the former, there is a case to be made for the abolition of the university— at least in its currently dominant, westernised, capitalist form (Eve and Dear 2016; Pusey 2017). Part of this might be the abolition of disciplines. This would in all likelihood require collective mobilisation by academics and wider constituencies of support in favour of a radical rethinking of the ways that teaching and research takes place. From time to time collective mobilisation of scholars and their allies has taken place, and some of the disciplining tendencies of neoliberal education have been challenged (see, for example, Morrish and The Analogue University Writing Collective 2017; Noterman and Pusey 2012). It cannot, however, be assumed—or even expected—that a wide, collective struggle towards the abolition of the disciplinary university will emerge or that if it did that it would be successful (see, for example, Grant and Elizabeth 2015). As discussed above, postdisciplinarity requires a radical reimagining of approaches to scholarship. Even as a postdisciplinary academy might be imaged, material conditions and the effects of actually existing power relations cannot be imagined out of existence (see, for example, Pusey 2017: 17).

What, then, of the smaller scale, less utopian hope for moves towards postdisciplinarity? This might have more in common with what Agnes Bosanquet (2017) calls ‘small, targeted acts of resistance’, drawing on Barbara Grant’s notion of ‘slow, tiny acts of resistance’ (see also Grant and Elizabeth 2015). In this kind of approach, one might begin from the position that ‘[i]ndividual academics cannot disentangle themselves from the broader institutional milieu in which they work, but they can and... should struggle to do so’ (Cribb and Gerwitz 2013: 348). Individual
scholars can (to some extent) resist, and they can (at times) refuse. When the demand comes at the postdisciplinary scholar, like it came at Edward Lear’s Scroobious Pip,

“Tell us all about yourself, we pray! / For as yet we can’t make out in the least / If you’re Fish or Insect, or Bird or Beast!” they might (at times at least) reply as the Scroobious Pip does, refusing the questioner’s categories: ‘My only name is the Scroobious Pip’ (see Madrid 2017). Scholars can, moreover, also forge endeavours in common within and beyond the academy (Waitere et al. 2011; Pusey 2017). Individual scholars’ ‘tiny acts of resistance’ can be combined (Bosanquet 2017; Waitere et al. 2011). Spaces of solidarity and commons can be built such that even if the abolition of disciplines – or of the university – as currently understood is not immediately achieved on a grand scale, something resembling this can be prefigured and lessons learned from this (see, for example Pusey 2017). To bring the discussion, in closing, back to rights specifically, such resistance and refusal can be linked to the notion of a ‘right to the university’ (Bhandar, 2013; Pusey 2017: 12-13). As Andre Pusey puts it (2017: 12-13), ‘[t]his is not a right within the liberal framework of state-granted legislation, but a right that is produced through the refusal of the capture of the common’. In proclaiming and pursuing such as right, it is possible to ‘reimagin[e] the university and beg[in] to experiment with reinventing it’ (Pusey 2017: 13). Human rights teaching and research ought to take account of the environment in which it takes place, and when – as is so often the case – this environment produces power relations with disciplining and punishing effects, these should be refused and resisted to the extent it is possible to do so. This would be to the benefit of scholars, students and – ultimately – to the wider practice of human rights.
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