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Creativity or Conformity? Building Cultures of Creativity in Higher Education

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Another way of thinking: Creativity *and* Conformity **Kerry Harman¹ & Erik Bohemia²**

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Abstract

This paper explores possible tactics for academics working within a context of regulation and constraint. One tactic we suggest is moving outside of a creativity/conformity binary. Rather than understanding creativity and conformity as separate, where one is understood as excluding the other, we discuss the potential of examining the relationships between them. We use the theme of ‘structure and play’ to illustrate our argument. In the first part of the paper using various examples from art and design, fields generally associated with creativity, we explore the interrelatedness of creativity and conformity. For example, how might design styles, which are generally understood as creative outcomes, constrain creativity and lead to conformity within the design field? Is fashion producing creativity or conformity? Conversely, the ways conformity provides the conditions for creativity are also examined. For example, the conformity imposed by the State on artists within the communist block and how this contributed to a thriving underground arts movement which challenged conformity and State regulation. Continuing the theme of ‘structure and play’ we provide a story from an Australian university which offers insight into the ongoing renegotiation of power in the academy. This account illustrates the ways programmatic government within the university, with the aim of regulating conduct, contributed to unanticipated outcomes.

We propose that a relational view of power is useful for academics operating in the current higher education context as it brings into view sites where power might begin to be renegotiated.

Another way of thinking: Creativity *and* Conformity

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to generate discussion on possible tactics that might be taken up by academics in response to current governmental strategies which aim to regulate the higher education sector. This paper was written after an initial visit to the Creativity or Conformity conference website. As academics who have recently arrived in the United Kingdom, we were particularly interested in the issues to be explored at the conference and actively participating in promoting creative learning within a higher education context. However, we were troubled by the conference title, *Creativity or Conformity*, and the either/or position that this title sets up and the top-down view of power implicit in the text on the conference website. Drawing on a Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Foucault, 1980, 1982, 1991; Patton, 1994), we believe that it is useful to consider the complexities of power, where power is understood as both enabling and constraining, and the possibilities this opens up for renegotiating relations of power in a higher education context.

Rather than understanding creativity and conformity as separate elements, where one is understood as excluding the other, we discuss the potential of examining the relationships that might exist between them. In other words, how might creativity produce conformity and how might conformity provide the conditions for creativity? In the first part of the paper we provide a brief outline of the Foucauldian poststructural theory we are drawing on and provide some examples from art and design to illustrate the complex relationship between creativity and conformity. In the second part of the paper we link our theoretical position to a key concern of the conference: the discovery of practical ways for promoting creative learning in the face of increasingly stringent conditions in the higher education sector. Drawing on examples of everyday work practice in an Australian university from one of the authors we foreground the relational aspects of power and the renegotiation of power within the academy. This account draws attention to the indeterminacy of power and the unanticipated outcomes of government.

The indeterminacy of power

The ideas in this discussion paper draw on Foucauldian poststructural theory which directs attention to the relationship between discourse and power (Mills, 1997; Weedon, 1987). Poststructural theorists point to the way that meanings are never fixed and discourses do not always get used for the purposes they were intended (Lloyd, 2005; Ransom, 1997; Rose, 1999a). A Foucauldian conceptualisation of power provides a view of power as relational rather than only top-down and deterministic.

This view enables the indeterminacy of power to be explored, and it is this take on power that we believe is valuable to consider with the push to increasing programmatic government in the higher education sector. We suggest that within the conformity and structure currently being imposed by government¹ in the higher education sector, there is also space for creativity and ‘play’ (Rose, 1999a; Usher, 2000). The notion of structure and play makes visible potential spaces where existing relations of power might begin to be renegotiated or contested. While actions ‘may be prescribed by a discursive system, there is always room for reinterpretation and manoeuvre’ (Linstead, date unknown, unpagged).

This view of power enables another take on ‘creativity or conformity’, where it may be useful to consider the relationships between these elements, rather than presupposing they are separate. In the following section, using examples from art and design, fields usually associated with creativity, we begin to direct attention to the complexity of the relationships between creativity and conformity. While we briefly consider the ways creativity might provide the conditions for conformity, our focus is on the ways that conformity (and regulation) has provided the conditions for creativity. Our interest here is in making visible tactics for opening up space within regulation and conformity (de Certeau, 1984).

Creativity *and* Conformity

In beginning to explore the relationship between creativity and conformity we ask: How might a design style *regulate* what is possible and imaginable? Bauhaus provides a good example of a design style and ideology which had a major influence on design and architecture, a style which might still regulate in some ways what is permissible in design. The Design Institute of Australia’s logo (see Figure 1) provides an indication of the pervasiveness of Bauhaus thinking within the field of design. The reference to Kandinsky's yellow triangle, red square, and blue circle in their corporate logo suggests the importance of Bauhaus principles to design.



Figure 1 Design Institute of Australia Logo

The principles of Bauhaus dominated design style well until the arrival of Memphis design in the early 1980s. For example, Braun, under the design leadership of Dieter Rams incorporated Bauhaus ‘Good Design’ principles in their range of products (see Figure 2). It is in this sense that design styles, which are generally understood as creative outcomes, can also be understood as constraining creativity and leading to conformity within the design field.

¹ This includes both big ‘G’ Government by the State and small ‘g’ government, such as the government of higher education institutions by senior management and the government of the self (Miller & Rose, 1993).



Figure 2 Audio system PC4000, Braun (Rams, 1977)

Another example of the complexity of the relationship between creativity and conformity can be found in fashion. Fashion is generally understood as a creative form and a way of expressing an ‘authentic’ identity. However, Simmel, in an essay on the philosophy of fashion draws attention to the ambivalence of fashion. He proposed that:

As soon as a fashion has been universally adopted, that is, as soon as anything that was originally done only by a few has really come to be practised by all – as is the certain elements of clothing and in various forms of social conduct – we no longer characterize it as fashion. (2001, p. 238)

Simmel points to the ongoing tension between individuality and conformity that is expressed in fashion. For example, clothes express individuality and creativity but at the same time cover and conceal.

Perhaps more relevant to the concerns and interests of this paper is an exploration of the ways that conformity provides the conditions for creativity. One example is the conformity imposed by the State on the arts within the communist block and how regulation created a thriving underground movement with a high level of creativity in challenging the imposed conformity. Czech film provides a wonderful example of the notion of structure and play. We briefly discuss two, now classic, films produced during the communist era in Czechoslovakia.

The satirical movie *Hoří, má panenko* (The Firemen's Ball), directed by Miloš Forman in 1967, is an example of the way Czech and Slovak artists such as moviemakers, writers, comedians, musicians and singers used allegory to comment on the ruling communist regime. The movie ostensibly explores the corruption and apathy of small town folks. The comical story is about a poorly executed ball by the local fire brigade to which all the town is invited. The firemen's incompetence, corruption and lethargy can be read as a metaphor for the communist state party, which was the Government. The movie was withdrawn from circulation in Czechoslovakia after approximately a year on the order of the President (Ventura, unknown).



A scene from The Firemen's Ball – The Beauty Contest
(<http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/czech-slovak-1.jsp>)

Another example is *Ucho* (The Ear, 1969/1970) directed by Karel Kachyňa. This director usually used a more subtle criticism of the communist government, however, *The Ear* was unusual as it directly criticised the Communist Party practice of keeping a close surveillance on its citizens including its own ‘devoted’ party members. This movie, because of its overt political comment, was banned for 20 years until the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 (Brennan, unknown). It, along with many other movies, was only to be screened in Czechoslovakia after the collapse of communism.

There are many examples of the way regulation and control by the State contributed to unanticipated and often very creative outcomes in the performing arts. These include: the dissident play-writer Václav Havel, the future president of post-communist Czechoslovakia, who satirized communist bureaucracy and worked with one of the key underground bands ‘The Plastic People of the Universe’; Karel Kryl a protest song writer who became an icon of the anti-communist movement and had to escape prosecution by living in West Germany; the comic duo Lasica & Satinský who used well known plays such as ‘Waiting for Godot’, which became ‘Not Waiting for Godot’, to comment on the day-to-day struggles of ordinary people – struggles which in the official communist propaganda only existed in capitalist countries.

These examples are illustrative of an ongoing renegotiation of power and regulation imposed by the Communist Government. However, it is important to add here that we are not suggesting that increasingly programmatic government is a ‘good’ and necessary thing, rather we seek to direct attention to the complexity of the relationships between creativity and conformity. Nor do we suggest that there is something inherent in artists, some essential characteristic, that enables them to resist top-down power. Indeed, it is this individualised notion of the autonomous subject that we seek to disrupt.

The above section of the paper has been intended as an introduction only to a consideration of the complexity of the relationships between creativity and conformity, rather than offering a detailed theorisation. Hopefully, it has been persuasive in terms of the potential that this way of thinking might offer. As introduced previously, an aim of this paper is to direct attention to a view of power as relational, rather than only viewing power as top-down. Therefore, we now turn to the theme of structure and play, and the spaces this take on power opens up when considering the push to programmatic change in a higher education context (Usher, 2000).

Structure and play within the academy

One of the authors was the Head of Program of an Industrial Design bachelor degree offered at an Australian university and we draw on their everyday experience within the academy to foreground the theme of structure and play. The following story focuses on government within the university and the attempt to regulate academic conduct through the introduction of policy and organisational restructures. The ongoing contestation and renegotiation of power by academics, however, illustrates the unanticipated outcomes of government and the ways that programs do not necessarily play out in the way they were intended. As such, this story offers insight into the complexity of power. We suggest that in better understanding the complexities of power in the academy, and its relational aspects, tactics for renegotiating relations of power come into view. We provide a descriptive account of changes to a final year Industrial Design Honours course at an Australian university, then use Foucauldian concepts to provide a more complicated reading of power at this site.

Renegotiating Administrative Boundaries

The fourth year of the Industrial Design degree at this particular university had been structured as a compulsory (embedded) honours year since its inception in the 1990s, with students graduating from the program with either Class 1 Honours, Class 2 Honours or a Pass. In this final year of their degree students undertake a year long research-based project. The Honours course had been structured with the aim of encouraging innovative approaches to design problems, with the course delivered in two stages. The aim of the first stage was for a student, through research, to identify opportunities and propose possible solutions to a design problem that they were interested in exploring. This research stage culminated in the production of an honours thesis that would be used in the second stage to guide the subsequent realisation the design proposal. The second stage offered the student the chance to consolidate the range of methods and processes developed and evaluated during stage one.

Each year students' research topics varied substantially in the areas they elected to explore. Therefore, each student's research project differed in its complexity, scope and application. The supervisor and the student regularly discussed expected project outcomes and student progress in the design studio, a process requiring considerable resources in terms of academic staff.

While this course structure had worked well in the past, a number of challenges had arisen which prompted the redevelopment of the final year program, one of these being a decline in the percentage of students proceeding from third year and undertaking the final honours year. While the overall number of students in the final year was increasing, itself a significant challenge and discussed below, not all students were interested in the research focus of the fourth year program and were exiting after completing only three years of the Industrial Design degree.² The early departure of

² The Industrial Design degree has an early exit point which provides students with an option to leave in their third year with a Design and Technology degree. The difference between these two degrees is that the Design and Technology is a foundation degree to be complemented with a follow-on postgraduate education degree to qualify students to become Design and Technology high school teachers while the four year Industrial Design degree qualifies students to register as industrial designers with the DIA, professional association for Industrial Design.

students, and their failure to take up a fourth year of study was problematic for the School as it meant that the completion rate was low. In the Australian higher education context, completion rates are an important indicator of quality.

Another challenge in regard to the existing structure was that some of the industrial design lecturers involved in the Honours year course saw little or no value in the thesis writing component of the program and were critical of its relevance to design practice. Thesis writing was not important for these lecturers and they had no interest in supervising this component of the project.

Another, perhaps more pressing issue, at least for the course co-ordinator, was increasing class size. The existing structure had worked quite well with a relatively small group of students as two to three academic supervisors shared the supervision of the entire class. Having only one final year class, with all academic supervisors present in the fourth year studio, enabled project deliverables to be discussed in the classroom setting, with all the staff involved. This provided the lecturers with a sense that assessment was consistent across the group.

However, over the past five years the student intake into the Industrial Design degree had trebled. As a result, the number of students enrolling into the final year of the course had more than doubled. The increase in student numbers meant that more and more lecturers were needed to supervise the Honours course. This contributed to the reorganisation of the final year class in 2003 into two separate groups. These classes were conducted in two different locations and were supervised by two different sets of lecturers. An unexpected outcome of the split was that the staff working with the Tuesday group no longer knew what was happening in the Wednesday group, and vice versa. This created problems in terms of the coordination of the final year course. For example, sometimes conflicting information in relation to assessment would be given to students in the two different groups.

The increase in class size in the final year, combined with an overall decline in the percentage of students proceeding to fourth year, prompted the course coordinator, in collaboration with staff working on the course, to reassess the course structure. One outcome of this review was a proposal to introduce a new parallel stream to the existing honours year program. The aim was to provide students and staff with a teaching and learning environment where the focus was on the further development of design studio skills, rather than research skills, thus, building on their design studio experience. However at the same time, the university was rationalising courses, and the parallel final year stream was not able to be introduced. Senior management were wanting to reduce the number of courses on offer in order to bring about economic efficiencies through larger class sizes (Contractor, 2003).

One way of achieving this objective was through the implementation of an Embedded Honours policy. The aim of this policy was to standardise the rules, structure and requirements of Embedded Honours programs across the university, with the argument that more resources could be provided for Honours year students. Generally, this was achieved by limiting the number of students who were eligible to be admitted into Embedded Honours courses. Thus, the admission rule made the Embedded Honours course virtually indistinguishable from End-On Honours programs, where only the top performing students were eligible to be admitted.

The introduction of this policy had quite troubling implications for industrial design students as only approximately one third of students would be able to proceed from third year into the final year Embedded Honours class. This was problematic as a four year Industrial Design degree is the minimum requirement for registering with the Design Institute of Australia and other professional associations.

However, the proposed implementation of the Embedded Honours policy was used by the Head of Program to renegotiate the introduction of the parallel stream in the final year Industrial Design degree. It was argued that the introduction of the Embedded Honours policy would disadvantage students who had insufficient marks to commence the Honours course as students needed to complete a four year Industrial Design program in order to be admitted into professional associations. The parallel stream for fourth year was introduced and is now in its second year of operation. All students successfully completing their third year studies are able to proceed into a fourth year course.

Another way of thinking about power

The above story described changes to an Honours year Industrial Design course at Australian university. While a story about university administration might seem rather dull and ‘hum-drum’, and changes to an embedded honours policy, a seemingly innocuous event, a reading of this story using Foucauldian concepts enables the complexities of power to be explored.

A Foucauldian reading complicates the taken for granted assumption that power, knowledge and subjectivity are separate from each other, instead foregrounding their relationships (Dean, 1994). For example, in the above account the industrial design lecturers were attempting to produce particular types of student conduct through the structure of the Honours year course. This view foregrounds the complexities of the relationship between power and learning, rather than understanding power as only top-down and only taking the form of oppression (Foucault, 1980, 1982; Rose, 1999b).

Poststructural education literature alerts us to the exercise of power through pedagogical relationships (Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon, & Usher, 2004; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). However, the complexity of the relationships between power and learning tend to be overlooked when power is understood as residing, for example, in the State or with senior management in the workplace (Rose, 1999a). It is this top-down view of power which is re-echoed in the text of the conference website. While the conference website claims that ‘We all agree that students learn best when they are strongly motivated’, we actually don’t agree with the liberal humanist assumptions underpinning this universal claim. The notion that ‘motivation is best stimulated in an environment which is open and flexible, which encourages innovation, which is in a word, creative’, while an incredibly seductive concept, is one which overlooks the exercise of power in pedagogical relationships. Underpinning the views expressed on the website is the notion of autonomous subjectivity, where it is presupposed that subjectivity is separate from power and that it is through a Maslowian concept of self-actualisation that freedom can be achieved (1943).

The assumption by many academics that learning is necessarily empowering and liberating is a view requiring much closer examination. For example, Dean (1999, pp. 36-37) points out:

by noting that notions of 'empowerment' are capable of being used by very different political stances and are themselves imbricated in definite sets of power relations, we produce a certain discomfort for the advocates of such notions of all political persuasions, particularly those who imagine themselves to be standing outside relations of power. Similarly, a consideration of how the self-governing capacities of the governed are a key feature of contemporary political rule problematizes the radical view of emancipation as the liberation of the agency of those who are oppressed.

A recognition of the complex relationships between power and learning and the part played by academics in networks of power that work to reproduce particular modes of subjectivity as seemingly natural is an important start in beginning to renegotiate relations of power.

A Foucauldian take on the relationship between power and subjectivity disrupts a deterministic view where governors are understood as being in control and determining organisational outcomes. The success of programs of government is never automatic as they rely on the active take up of subject positions. As Miller and Rose (1993, p. 84) conclude:

Whilst 'governmentality' is eternally optimistic, 'government' is a congenitally failing operation.

It is the indeterminacy of government that we want to foreground in this paper as it draws attention to sites of struggle that remain out of view when power is understood as top-down. A Foucauldian reading of the above account of the Honours course makes visible the failure to take up particular subject positions and the renegotiation of power.

One such site was the students' renegotiation of the disciplinary power of the academy through failing to take up the fourth year course. While industrial design academics, and professional associations might consider it necessary to complete a four year degree in order to 'become' industrial designers, students were renegotiating this disciplinary mode of power by leaving the course after the third year. Many of these students were already working (but not necessarily in the field of industrial design) and a fourth year of academic study had little appeal.

Another site of struggle was the struggle around 'what counted' as knowledge in the Industrial Design degree and the renegotiation of the final year course structure by industrial design staff. Many of the industrial design lecturers in the School have not had a traditional academic apprenticeship by way of completing a doctoral thesis. Instead, they have gained their knowledge of industrial design as practitioners and this is how they know and understand themselves. The inclusion of research methods and an academic way of knowing in the Honours year course was not considered an important or necessary aspect of the course. In other words, this knowledge didn't count. This story re-echoes the contemporary struggle being played out around practise-based

versus disciplinary knowledge and what counts as learning (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). A poststructural view complicates a taken for granted separation between practice and theory, and opens up space for ways of knowing other than through the methods of science (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1998; Latour, 1988; Michelson, 1996).

Another site for the renegotiation of power is exemplified in the struggle between the Head of Program and senior management at the university. A discourse of qualification is a powerful discourse in circulation in the academy as it is an institution responsible for administering qualifications. This discourse, however, was taken up by the Head of Program and used for purposes other than intended. That is, it was used to introduce a new course at a time the university was 'retiring' courses and reducing the number of programs available to students. It is this type of thinking and the ways that academics might creatively use mainstream discourses in an effort to transgress regulation that we think is productive.

Concluding Comments

These examples begin to illustrate the ways the introduction of programmatic government, with the intent to control and regulate conduct, often lead to unanticipated outcomes. They point to spaces within regulation for the renegotiation of power. A relational view of power, however, is not to suggest that top-down power does not exist in the academy. This would be a particularly naïve view. The ongoing restructures at this university were very much a part of the operation of top-down power by senior management, itself not disconnected with changes in Government policy and the push to more enterprising modes of conduct (Fullerton, 2005; Gallagher, 2000).

While these accounts come from an Australian Higher Education context, we believe that they exemplify a way of thinking that is useful with the push to increasing regulation within higher education. However, we do not suggest that these accounts provide a rationale for models to be transferred to the United Kingdom. While there are similarities between the two settings, there are also differences. It is a programmatic view, underpinned by the Enlightenment belief in universal reason and generalisable laws, that we are attempting to disrupt.

This account of the renegotiation of power in an Honours year course might appear mundane, and not particularly important in the overall context of the globalisation and corporatisation of education, RAE's and quality assurance schemes. However, that is what we see as its value. It is to the renegotiation of strategies of power through our *everyday* practice as academics, for example in curriculum design, course organisation, research practice, and so on, that we seek to draw attention. This view re-presents academics as active players in renegotiating power relations in the academy, not passive subjects, only acted on by top-down forces. This is a view that offers some hope in terms of an increasingly regulated higher education sector, but not a romantic and idealised hope offered for example by a discourse of 'empowerment' or a liberatory understanding of learning.

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