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Education, philosophy and academic practice: Nursing studies in the posthistorical university

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Summary   This paper is an amended and abridged version of a seminar given at the NET/NEP 1st Nurse Education International Conference in Vancouver, Canada. The topic of the paper arose from our growing concerns about the state of nurse education and its position in the university at the start of the twenty-first century. We share the fears expressed by Readings that the university has lost its way and is increasingly driven by a business agenda and a quest for ever-greater efficiency. Our biggest concern is with the impact that the so-called 'posthistorical university' is having on the study of nursing, particularly the growing pressure on nurse academics to focus their attention and energy on output at the expense of process, and on research at the expense of practice and practitioner development. We suggest that the solution might lie with Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of postmodern philosophy as a way of opening up debate and, in his words, saving the honour of thinking.
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Introduction

This paper is based around the work of two writers and philosophers: firstly, Jean-François Lyotard and his seminal works *The Postmodern Condition* from 1979 and *The Differend* from 1983; and secondly, Bill Readings and in particular, his book *The University in Ruins*, published posthumously in 1996.

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Each of these books is concerned with the role and function of the university in the latter half of the 20th century, in Lyotard's words 'at this very Postmodern moment that finds the university nearing what may be its end' (Lyotard, 1984, xxv). Readings broadly agrees with Lyotard's thesis of the end of the university as we know it, but rejects the term 'Postmodern' as suggesting, perhaps, that the modern university is being replaced with 'a newer, more critical institution, which is to say, an even more modern university than the modern university' (Readings, 1996, p. 6). For Readings, the current state of the university is not postmodern, but

posthistorical, a term he used in a derogatory sense 'in order to insist upon the sense that the institution has outlived itself' (ibid).

This paper has three aims. Firstly, to outline the position of these writers, in particular, Readings' thesis of the posthistorical university, and to suggest that the state of affairs in higher education has not improved since they were writing towards the end of the 20th century. Indeed, we will argue that some of their most troubling predictions have, in the meantime, come to pass. Secondly, to apply the writing of Lyotard and Readings to nursing and some of the other newer disciplines in the university, and in particular, to examine some of the problems encountered by nursing and nurse academics in the posthistorical university. And thirdly, to take a tentative look beyond the current posthistorical university as described a decade ago by Readings, to the postmodern university foreseen by Lyotard in the 1970s, but which has not yet come to pass.

The rise of the posthistorical university

In his book *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1984) argues that knowledge is usually conveyed through stories or narratives. Some of these stories, such as myths, legends, fables and folk tales, are validated by the societies in which, and on whose behalf, they are told. These 'little narratives' require a teller and one or more listeners, and it is the listeners who determine the validity and/or truth of the message being conveyed.

Other knowledge-claims derive from what Lyotard calls 'metanarratives', which are self-validating narratives; that is, their validity lies not outside with the listener, but is part of the story being told. A good example is the metanarrative of science. A scientist's narration of her research project includes not only the findings, but also an account of how those findings were achieved (the method) and why they are valid and reliable (the methodology). A metanarrative is therefore self-contained, and has no need of an audience; a scientific paper does not necessarily need to be read in order to be accepted as valid, it merely needs to be published in the appropriate journal.

Whereas a metanarrative is *self*-validating, a grand narrative extends the boundaries of validation *beyond* itself; it is, in Readings' words, 'a *universal* metanarrative, capable of accounting for all other stories in order to reveal their true meanings' (Readings, 1991, p. xxxiii). For example, Christianity tells the *narrative* of Christ as the son of God, the *metanarrative* of why it is true that Christ is the son of God, and the *grand narrative* of why this particular story is more true than other competing stories about God. Similarly, we might argue that, in the hands of writers such as Richard Dawkins, science has moved from a self-validating *metanarrative* to a *grand narrative* that attempts to replace and even to ridicule competing explanations about the workings of the world such as those offered by various religions. This position is sometimes referred to disparagingly as scientism (Sorell, 1991).

Lyotard argues that the two grand narratives that have traditionally informed and driven the modern university from the start of the enlightenment up until the end of the Second World War, are the grand narratives of truth and of justice or emancipation. The first of these regards knowledge as an end in itself, sees truth as its ultimate goal, and is usually found within arts and humanities departments of the university. The second grand narrative regards knowledge as the means to the ends of freedom, justice and the reduction of suffering, and is usually found in university departments of natural, biological, social and political sciences. This theme of emancipation through science can be seen particularly in the work of seminal thinkers from the first half of the 20th century such as Freud, Darwin, Marx and Einstein.

These grand narratives have always existed in a state of conflict and tension, perhaps best exemplified by the public and very acrimonious 'Two Cultures' debate in the 1950s and 1960s between C.P. Snow (on the side of science) and F.R. Leavis and others (on the side of the arts). Snow's point was that, since the Renaissance, the arts and the sciences have become more and more separated until we have reached a point where the two cultures do not, and indeed, cannot talk to each other (Snow, 1963). For Lyotard, the very difficult, perhaps impossible, task of maintaining and uniting these two grand narratives of science and the arts has traditionally fallen to the discipline of philosophy, which straddled them both.

However, in the latter part of the 20th century, Lyotard detected a growing 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), that is, a mistrust of self-validating stories, stories that are taken for granted, that require no reference beyond their own narratives for their justification. For Lyotard, the enlightenment project of modernity and the unquestioning trust in science is over: it has been, in his words, 'liquidated'. The final nail in its coffin was signified by the events at Auschwitz, which pushed reason and rationality to their logical and perhaps inevitable conclusion: the scientific and rational administration of genocide (Lyotard, 1992). As Readings noted: 'the summit of reason, order, administration, is also the summit of terror'

(Readings, 1991, p. 22). We might argue that, 'after Auschwitz' (Adorno, 1973), Western society felt that it could no longer trust itself, and has instead handed over responsibility for its development to the impersonal forces of economics and the market. For Lyotard, then, the enlightenment grand narratives of truth and justice have been replaced in the posthistorical university by the grand narrative of advanced liberal capitalism. Philosophy has ultimately failed in its project of maintaining and uniting the arts and sciences, and has all but vanished from many universities as a separate and distinct 'pure' discipline.

The collapse of the traditional grand narratives and the transition from the modern to the posthistorical university has brought about what is sometimes referred to as the 'crisis of legitimation': if we can no longer appeal to truth and/or justice as self-evident legitimation of our activities within the university, then to what *can* we appeal? Readings' answer is *efficiency* (Readings, 1996). He claims that, in the post-historical university, knowledge is valued in terms of its efficiency and profitability in a market-driven economy rather than for its potential to fulfil the humanistic goals of truth and justice. Knowledge has been reduced to a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place. We might argue even further that the new grand narrative of liberal capitalism values raw, unanalysed *information* over and above academic knowledge, leading to Readings' thesis of 'the university in ruins' (Readings, 1996).

Since the time of the enlightenment, the modern university has always been regarded as the 'producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture' (Readings, 1996, p. 3), concerned with the moral, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual growth not just of students, but of society in general (Thompson and Watson, 2006). However, the university has lost its way, lost its role and lost its function. It has, Readings claims, outlived itself. His paradigm case of the university in ruins is the rise of the discipline of Cultural Studies. He argues firstly that the introduction of culture as a distinct subject for study is an indication that the university as an institution has lost its traditional role of culture carrier for society; that 'the idea of Cultural Studies arises at the point when the notion of culture ceases to mean anything vital for the university as a whole' (Readings, 1996, p. 91).

Furthermore, the word 'studies' in the title alerts us to the fact that it is no longer taken for granted that studying is the primary activity conducted within the university. The addition of the word 'studies' to a growing number of new academic disciplines is perhaps a sign that these disciplines have a rather different relationship to the university than the more traditional ones.

Nursing studies and the new technologies

The relevance of this discussion to nursing should now become apparent, since pre-registration nursing education, often in the guise of 'nursing studies', was making its entrance *en masse* to the university (at least in the UK) at about the same time that Readings was bemoaning the fact that the university was in ruins, that it had lost its role and its function.

One explanation for this conjunction might be that nursing studies, along with a multitude of other professional and practice-based 'studies', has helped to ruin the university by deflecting from its traditional role as the arbiter of culture for society. A more charitable interpretation is that the new post-enlightenment grand narrative of liberal capitalism *made possible* the entry of these new disciplines into the academy. In other words, nursing studies could only exist fully as a university discipline once the traditional grand narratives of truth and justice had been abandoned, along with many of the long-standing arts and science disciplines associated with them. This transition can be seen clearly in the UK, where the decline of the enlightenment grand narratives has been accompanied by the closure of a number of traditional arts and science departments, notably chemistry, sociology, history and languages, to be replaced by more applied disciplines such as nursing studies, business studies, sport and leisure studies, area studies, and so on.

These disciplines belong neither in the arts nor in the sciences; they aspire neither to the grand narrative of truth nor of justice. Some nurse academics have made the claim that nursing is both an art *and* a science; we are not convinced by this argument, and regard it as neither. Rather, we would argue, nursing studies and many of the other subjects mentioned earlier are the product of the post-enlightenment post-war grand narrative of advanced liberal capitalism. As such, their primary function is efficiency, and we will refer to them as the 'new technologies'.

However, the posthistorical university is still in a state of transition; whilst aspiring to become a more business-like organization, it continues in part to maintain and promote many of the old enlightenment values and goals, and herein lie a number of problems for nursing and the other new technologies.

Research

The argument put forward by both Readings and Lyotard is that the enlightenment grand narratives of truth and justice have been replaced in the university by the grand narrative of liberal capitalism, which is justified by the appeal to efficiency. Readings points out that this can be seen most clearly in the attitude taken by the post-historical university towards research. In the UK, initiatives such the Cochrane Collaboration and particularly the evidence-based nursing movement, have signalled a distinct shift away from research as part of the enlightenment project of contributing to knowledge and truth, and towards the notion of research as a machine for generating information. So, for example, the gold-standard methodology of the RCT is most often employed to test new treatment interventions or conduct clinical trials. The outcome of this type of research is not usually new knowledge and theory, but new *information* about the clinical effectiveness and perhaps the cost effectiveness of various clinical interventions.

Furthermore, this general, decontextualised information is a valuable commodity that can be exchanged in the market-place for hard cash. As we claimed earlier, research has become part of the post-enlightenment drive towards efficiency and effectiveness. Certainly, the idea of speculative or theoretical research, conducted for no other reason than to add to our knowledge about the world, appears to be completely dead not only in nursing studies, but even in the more traditional disciplines. Research, more than ever before, is intimately tied to finance, not only as a means of *funding* research, but as the criterion for judging its *quality*. One of the key measures used in the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is the amount of cash in the form of research grants brought into the university. The more money that a university wins in research grants, the better is the quality of its research judged to be.

Arguably, researchers are increasingly taking on projects *not* because they necessarily believe that they are making a worthwhile contribution to knowledge, *not* because they have a particular interest in the subject or methodology, not even necessarily because their university might make some money out of the project, but simply because, in the posthistorical university, research income is a major criterion used to assess quality. We are moving away from the values of the academy towards the rules and rigours of the manufacturing industry and the production line; we are increasingly concerned with throughput rather than process, with research funding *in* and research papers *out*; these, rather than the skill, craftsmanship and passion of the researcher, form the basis of the assessment of research quality in UK universities. Research is fast becoming a mechanised process and is being conducted more and more in large teams which resemble Fordist production lines, where each member has a small, specialised job and rarely gets to see the big picture. Research has itself become a technology; an information generating machine, driven by the ethos of efficiency rather than, as Wright Mills (1970) described back in the nineteen sixties, 'intellectual craftsmanship' and the desire for knowledge.

Teaching and learning

This manufacturing ethos also spills over into the teaching and learning mission of the posthistorical university in at least two ways. Firstly, the shift in the grand narrative of the university from the values of the enlightenment to those of liberal capitalism has brought with it a growing awareness amongst students that when they enrol on a course and pay their fees, they are purchasing a commodity rather than an educational experience. If we also consider the way that degree courses have become modularised in recent years, with academic credits attached to each module, it is difficult to escape the feeling that the posthistorical university is coming to resemble a *Bureau de Change* where students can shop around for the best exchange rate of university fees for academic credits.

This is particularly apparent in the new technologies such as nursing. As academic qualifications become more and more important for promotion at work, many students are becoming less interested in the academic experience and more focussed on the final qualification. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that many students do not wish to purchase the educational experience and some do not even wish to purchase the knowledge and information identified in the learning outcomes of the modules, but are only interested in the academic credits awarded on successful completion, which can then be exchanged, back in the workplace, for pay rises and promotions. Conversely, of course, those students who *have* enrolled for the academic experience are often disappointed and thwarted in their endeavours by assessment-driven curricula and even by the attitudes and actions of their lecturers and fellow students.

Secondly, Readings points out that the university has become a 'bureaucratic corporation' in which the measure of educational excellence is the *administration* of process rather than any kind of judgement about process itself. Once again, at least in the UK, the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) might be seen by the cynic as being concerned little with either *teaching* or *quality*, but rather with *administration* and *quantity*. Thus, points are awarded for such quantifiable targets as time taken for the student to progress through the system, student retention rates, course completion rates and graduate employment data. The implication, of course, is that the excellent lecturer is one who efficiently administers the students smoothly through the system in such a way that facilitates the 'quality' targets of the university. Once again, those students who *do* expect to be educated rather than administered through the system are sometimes frustrated by their experience of what one student described to us as a 'sausage factory'.

Furthermore, we can see that the criteria by which teaching and research are each being assessed complement one another in a rather perverse fashion. On the one hand, lecturers are being encouraged to conduct more and more funded research and to publish more and more research papers. On the other hand, they are also being encouraged to streamline the passage of students and to process them quickly and efficiently through the system. Taken together, these two injunctions almost compel lecturers to invest more time in research and less in teaching. Given that, in the UK, far more kudos is attached to research output than to teaching output, it is easy to see why research activity is being awarded a disproportionate amount of time, funding and esteem.

Whilst such a situation might suit the more traditional university disciplines where, as we shall see, there is a much closer fit between research, teaching and practice, such a move in the new technologies is problematic to say the least. In particular, many nurse academics regard the transmission of knowledge to other practitioners through teaching as more important than the generation of knowledge through research. Producing new nurses is, understandably, seen by some as being of greater value than producing new knowledge or information. These values, however, are completely at odds with the value system of most UK universities, where a RAE-driven agenda continues to set the priorities, and where, in our own university, all new basic grade lecturers are required to have published four research papers before they can be appointed, but are not necessarily expected to have any experience or qualifications in teaching.

Professional practice

We can see, then, that academics in the 'new technologies' are somewhat compromised by their concern with practice and practitioners. The status of nursing practice within the university is problematic in a way that the practice of traditional academic disciplines such as mathematics, history and physics is not. This is indicated, as we suggested earlier, by the word 'studies' that often appears in the title of departments of nursing and nursing degrees. The fact that this is not *always* the case does not detract from the argument that the title 'nursing studies' makes sense in a way that 'mathematics studies' or 'history studies' or 'physics studies' does not. The point that the addition of the word 'studies' to mathematics adds nothing to its meaning and also sounds faintly ridiculous suggests that, by and large, the practice of mathematics *is* the study of mathematics. When we say of someone that they are a mathematician, or a historian, or a physicist, what we usually mean is that they are engaged in scholarly activity of some kind. The practice of mathematics is largely an academic activity that takes place at least partly in the university. The same is true of most of the traditional academic disciplines.

However, the new technologies, those that can happily be tagged with the word 'studies', such as nursing (studies), business (studies), sport and leisure (studies) and so on, have a very different relationship to practice. In these disciplines, practice is not directly related to research and scholarship and it does not generally take place in the university. The theoretical study and the practice of nursing are usually separate and distinct activities, often carried out by separate and distinct groups of people in separate and distinct locations. This is why the problem of the research-practice gap, which has continued to perplex many of us in nursing, is largely inconceivable in disciplines such as history, where to do research *is* to practice. It is also, perhaps, the reason why many nurse academics spend so long agonising over their identities; indeed, why we often feel it necessary to refer to ourselves as nurse academics — not quite nurses and not quite academics. Our colleagues in departments of history or mathematics have no such dilemma. The term 'historian-academic' makes little sense, since to be an academic is part of the very definition of what it is to be a historian in a way that is clearly not the case for a nurse.

Towards a postmodern university

This paper has expanded and developed Readings' thesis that the traditional idea of the university is in ruins, and is being replaced with a bureaucratic organisation whose business is the production and sale of information and qualifications. Whereas the traditional university was animated by the enlightenment grand narratives of truth, justice and emancipation, the new business organisation that is coming to replace it is driven by the pursuit of efficiency. And whereas the traditional academic was concerned with the generation and dissemination of knowledge and theory, her new role is the smooth and successful administration of students and research projects through an increasingly bureaucratic system.

In this brave new academic world, the acquisition of grant income, the publication of research papers, and student completion rates are rapidly becoming the criteria against which quality is measured. This state of affairs is particularly problematic for academics in the 'new technologies' such as nursing (studies), in which these criteria are rightly regarded by some as means to the end of practice and practitioner development rather than as ends in themselves. For some writers, the solution is a return to the 'uncompleted project of modernity' (Habermas, 1981) and the enlightenment metanarratives of truth and justice. For others, however, the solution requires a move forwards from the posthistorical to the postmodern university which, as we have seen, entails an attitude of incredulity toward *all* mentanarratives. The challenge, then, would be:

to think what it may mean to have *a university that has no idea*, that does not derive its name from an etymological confusion of unity and universality. (Readings, 1996, p. 122, our emphasis)

The postmodern academic has no 'big idea', no unifying and universalising project. She is not the producer, protector and inculcator of culture (Readings, 1996), she does not wish to resolve difference and disagreement by the imposition of any form of intellectual hegemony (Lyotard, 1988), but rather to find ways of keeping open the discourse between academics, researchers and practitioners. Her role is not to impose the accepted rigours of the academy, but to present them for debate and dispute (Rolfe, 2006). For Lyotard (1988), such a role is the job of the philosopher, who 'does not presuppose the rules of his own discourse' (p. xiv), but rather opens up the possibility and the space for examining all such rules.

We have therefore come full circle, back to the enlightenment idea of the philosopher as the keystone of the university, able to bridge the divide between disciplines and departments. However, unlike the traditional philosopher, Lyotard's postmodern philosopher does not usually reside in a department of philosophy. Postmodern philosophy is not a discipline but a way of thinking; postmodern philosophers are at home in any department and any discipline, and act as arbiters in inter- and intra-disciplinary disputes. Their aim, however, is not to attempt to resolve these disputes by the application of rules and judgements, but to keep debate open and alive, and ultimately 'to find, if not what can legitimate judgement, then at least how to save the honor of thinking' (Lyotard, 1988, p. xii).

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