

Pleasure and Academia? Really?

Book review of *Producing Pleasure in the Contemporary University*. Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei: Sense Publishers. Edited by Riddle, S., Harmes, M. K., & Danaher, P. A. (Eds.). (2017).

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Producing Pleasure in the Contemporary University is a collected work published by the brave Netherlands-based publisher Sense, which in recent years has disseminated a growing number of alternative outlooks on higher education, creativity and global perspectives. This volume is the 59th included in the book series *Bold Visions in Educational Research* edited by Kenneth Tobin (City University of New York, USA) and Carolyn Ali-Kahn (University of North Florida, USA). The series covers the areas of teaching and learning to teach, together with research methods in education. However, its stated purpose is not to propose generalisations or standardisation of methods, but rather to illustrate diverse examples of perspectives and practices for practitioners and novices. The present volume is well embedded in the series' themes and purposes, and contributes originally by bringing the higher education scholars' own educational and scholarly practice to the surface. The theme the authors have chosen to write about -the pain and pleasure of scholarly work - cannot be investigated except by means of intimate narratives. Understandably enough, many of the methodological tools used and described in this book derive from reflexive methods and autoethnography, which makes the narratives not only relevant but also pulsating with academic life.

Editors of this volume are Stewart Riddle, Marcus K. Harmes, and Patrick Alan Danaher, all fully or partly affiliated to the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. From *down-under* are also most of the authors' affiliations. Even though the book is an anthology, one does not feel one is reading a collected work. Possibly because the authors all ascribe to critical theories and perspectives on pedagogy and learning, or possibly because the context chosen – higher education and scholarly work – is common to all chapters, or likely because of a well-crafted editorial coordination. Whatever the reason, reading this book is a true pleasure (no pun intended). The reader's gratification is enhanced because the flow through the chapters is explicit. This wave of words brings about an ambitious idea for re-thinking higher education, a big idea that grows through the different chapters and ends up proposing pleasure as a concept and experience that can be positively disruptive for the contemporary university.

When a reader comes across this volume she might wonder: why pleasure? What has pleasure to do with academic work? Why should we investigate this theme at all? This reader, the one writing the present review, answered: Why not? Even though pleasure and academia might seem to be estranged from each other and separated by the accountable logic of neoliberal control and marketization, the question of finding pleasure in academia is rather relevant. The

book focuses on four reasons for this relevance: pleasure as universal human necessity, as academic need, as creative need, and as ideological - or existential - choice.

Human necessity. Several contributions in the book discuss the ever-growing demands that neoliberalism imposes on academic institutions and bring evidence for the unsustainability of this pressure and the policies based on it. Knowledge work and human growth is the core of human development, but the marketization and quantification of it is new to us as human beings and to educational institutions. The consequence of neoliberalism on universities is a "militarized knowledge factory" where "academics have become slaves of production. Skeletal overlords supervise the industry in which universities are now a business and students have turned into customers" (p. 121). Never before as now, surveys show high levels of dissatisfaction, work-life imbalance, widespread stress and depression among academics. Autonomy is systematically threatened, increasingly substituted by institutionalised control, by externally defined and assessed goals, by measurement of performance, and technopreneurial demands. Pleasure is the disruptive human necessity that counters accelerated control, pressure and performance. Pleasure is also a basic academic need. Pauses are needed in the craft of scholarship as much as productive moments, and are an integral part of academic work-processes. Using and producing academic works requires long-term thinking and feeling, such as inspiration and resonance. This is also a creative need. To find, invent and apply different and original ideas and solutions takes time: time to not understand, to tinker and wander, to think deeply, to think wrongly and re-think, adjust, deconstruct, destroy, re-build. Most of all, to bring pleasure to the academic policy table is about ideological and existential choices. Necessarily, these choices draw from feminist, critical, queer, promiscuous, postmodern theories and practices.

This book cleverly investigates intrinsic emotions in knowledge work: the satisfaction of getting answers to one's queries, the sensory pleasure of writing, the meaningfulness of disseminating one's expertise to others (students or colleagues), the excitement of collaborative communities. But also, the frustration intrinsic in this work, such as writer's block, the pain of staying in the not-knowing zone, the despair for having to cope with meaningless demands of neoliberal policies. The authors' portrait of the contemporary university is as dark as it has never been before. Threats to pleasure and even to an acceptable level of academic well-being are extrinsically imposed by mercenary tendencies (go where the money flows!), by leadership and policy actions that secure control and limit academic freedom (and consequently creativity), by performance-assessment measurements that promote quantity and shallow visibility rather than in-depth processes.

However, the authors do not leave the reader with frustration and sadness, rather with the strong wish to engage in the upcoming academic revolution. The reader feels ready to re-think scholarly practices and receives concrete ideas for future actions. The authors indeed propose to resist destructive, mercenary, dysfunctional policies by the systematic application of counter-narratives, alternative behaviours, sustainable and ethical life-choices, and critical thinking. The alternative they propose to the destructive neoliberal model is based on the appreciation and unapologetic cultivation of pleasure, on slow and meaningful knowledge investigation, on the caring and love for one's work and one's colleagues, on shared tasks in a community of (truly) equal co-creators, on work processes where a supportive collegiality allows for the organic 'taking turns' in tasks and demands, on the protection of (and for) creative and meaningful spaces.

The reader retains only one regret: that the authors did not take the time for a final proofreading of the text. The many typos disturb the reading experience and become seriously annoying when the reader's learning is unsupported by missing references or clearly misplaced attributions. Is this also a sign of the times that the book describes?

About the Author

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