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Challenging conditions for academic writing: the limits of excellence through competition.

Rosie R. Meade

As I approach the end of my term as co-editor of the *Community Development Journal* it seems like an appropriate time to think about the project of academic writing and the conditions under which it occurs. The entire edifice of academic publishing relies on trust; trust that research and writing have been produced in good faith; trust that editors and reviewers deal fairly and respectfully with the work, even as they/we subject it to critical appraisal; trust that journals and publishers are fully committed to the sharing of knowledge and learning; trust that ideas matter and that research illuminates; and trust that production and distribution channels are consistent and reliable. Even if trust is not some inherent quality or function of academic life, it might be hoped that the criss-crossing of identities and roles – whereby the editors are edited, reviewers are reviewed and the cited cite - might inspire and encourage ethical behaviour. The continued existence of the CDJ is partly a reflection of that foundation of trust upon which academic publishing is built, not least because our authors trust it as a possible home for their work. Doubtless, submission and review processes can be daunting, disappointing and even frustrating for authors, but hopefully, peer reviews that properly emphasise *the peer relationship* do create conditions under which writers can develop greater confidence or pride in their own voices and arguments.

The content of this journal identifies the historical, current and changing conditions within which community development and related forms of collective action are occurring internationally, and it offers frameworks for interpreting and critically analysing those conditions. Covid_19 has created new challenges for communities across the globe, while

also intensifying and bringing into sharper relief existing hierarchies, oppressions and forms of inequality (Kenny, 2020; Meade, 2020; O'Donovan, 2021; Westoby and Harris, 2020; See also this issue's Themed Section 'Community Development in Social Work Education: Themes for a Changing World'). For many of those/us who write for academic journals such as the CDJ, work-place pressures became acute during the pandemic as teaching, research, administration and pastoral commitments migrated online, and as boundaries between labour, caring, home and workplace were obliterated. Such pressures were most intensely felt by the increasing numbers among the academic workforce who are precariously employed and precariously housed. Nonetheless, there is still a widespread lingering suspicion that those who labour in universities are removed from the realities of life in community contexts and that their/our written intellectual engagement with injustice is abstracted from lived or practical experience. There are commonplace stereotypes and dismissals; popular images of superannuated professors idling away in ivory towers; the normalised concession that 'yes, yes, that's the theory but what about practice?'; and perceptions of academics as card carrying members of the much derided 'metropolitan elite'. Given that some academic labour, particularly for the celebrated and the tenured, offers satisfactions and rewards that vastly exceed those available to most workers, it is important to recognise the relativity, contingency, and context specificity of academic freedoms or (in)security – both within and between institutions *and* within and between states. However, that does not negate the validity of recognising and naming some profound contemporary threats to scholarship and to the dignity of those workers who undertake it.

Universities and academics as targets

In Brazil, the Bolsonaro regime has deliberately targeted the Federal Universities for financial retrenchment and ideological disparagement. In that context, as in many others, academia is not protected from the crushing weight of authoritarian populism; instead, in a typical inversion, authoritarian populism positions critical scholarship within the universities as yet another enemy of 'the people'. Marine Corde (in Chaloub et al., 2020, p.3) explains with respect to attacks in 2019 on the University of Brasília, the Federal Fluminense University, the Federal University of Bahia and the Federal University of Juiz de Fora how

The Education Ministry (Ministério da Educação –MEC) declared that it would cut the budget of these universities on the pretext that they were not achieving sufficiently good

academic results and that they were making too much fuss (“balbúrdia”). The real target was, rather, the good academic work done in those universities that take their social responsibility in Brazilian society seriously.

In Orbán’s Hungary, a similar preoccupation with taming academia has become obvious, perhaps most notoriously in the case of the Central European University, with the intense hostility directed at its social sciences and humanities departments and, above all, its Gender Studies Department. As Zsolt Enyedi (2018, p. 1069) outlines, pro-government media and mouthpieces have represented these disciplinary fields as effecting and enabling an affront to ‘family values in the region’. In their important analysis of the nature and form of state repression of academic work in Pakistan, Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajan (2027) observe the operations of an ‘academic-military-industrial complex’, whereby the university is constituted as ‘a key arena for the production and reinforcement of patriotic citizenship and nationalist discourse’. While these examples are not exhaustive they highlight how the political conformity, instrumentality and economic value of social research and critical education (in particular) are being questioned – a type of questioning that regularly emerges in ostensibly ‘liberal’ liberal-democracies too – *and* how those questions are given added momentum and menace when they are backed up by the full force of the state’s ideological and repressive apparatuses.

Therefore, we need to be conscious that in many contexts, the CDJ’s call for ‘critically focused articles which challenge received wisdom’, while still urgent and essential, brings with it the added risks of sanction, dismissal or worse for some social scientists and researchers. In the context of global inequality and structural violence, neither the costs nor the benefits of critical praxis are borne equally. In May 2021, the loss of life and injuries sustained by students and staff of Birzeit University in Palestine, as they protested Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and the forced expulsions of Palestinian families and communities from Sheikh Jarrah in occupied Jerusalem, reminded us that ‘academic distance’ in the face of oppression is a luxury many cannot afford.

Fadi Washaha, a student at Birzeit University, was murdered by Israeli forces two weeks ago while protesting the ongoing military occupation and settler-colonialism in Palestine. He was shot in the head.

Moreover, eleven students were arrested and dozens of the university's community were wounded, including Lena Meari, a faculty member at the university's Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences... (Birzeit University, June 2021, n.p.)

It should be noted that Lena Meari who is named above among those injured, and whose praxis is embedded within and elucidates the struggles for justice in Palestine, has enriched the critical scholarship of *Community Development Journal* through her 2017 article 'Colonial dispossession, developmental discourses, and humanitarian solidarity in "Area C": the case of the Palestinian Yanun Village, (Meari, 2017).

Other less acute but still troubling factors are shaping the cultures and practice of scholarship at the current historical juncture. In the pages of the CDJ, my editorial colleague Órla O'Donovan (2014; 2019) has already provided wise commentary on the politics of Open Access and the extent to which Plan S is (un)likely to democratise access to the fruits of research and scholarship. My remaining reflections are concerned with some of the other conditions of production, whereby the commodification of research, reputation and impact lock academic labourers into circuits of performativity-measurement-performativity-measurement-performativity-measurement *ad infinitum*.

Universities, excellence and competition

While, always a product of the distinctive labour and scholarship of their authors, academic articles can also be regarded as expressions of 'collective action', in the sense that Howard S. Becker conceived of 'art as a form of collective action' (Becker, 1974: p. 767), insofar as the means of conception, production, reception, distribution, comparison and judgement are collectively generated. In his writings on art Becker acknowledged the necessary but often overlooked social conditions and conventions *of* and *for* cultural and creative work to happen. Similarly, if not identically, academic writing is socially and collectively conditioned; a point that needs to be emphasised repeatedly because competition is so pervasive across academia. We might imagine the extensive networks within which journal articles are embedded and out of which they emerge; ranging from the communities that are the subjects/objects of research, to the seminars where ideas are tentatively shared, to the typesetting offices where final copy is laid out, to the libraries where they are catalogued and made accessible.

But there are other, comparisons that can be made between academic labour such as writing articles and labour that occurs within the spheres of the arts or the culture industries. Such comparisons speak instead to the political economy of institutions of learning, and the grip of ideology rather than ideas within them. They highlight the globalisation, neoliberalisation and commercialisation of universities, and the normalisation of precarious, conditional employment (See for example, Bellei, Cabalin, and Orellana, 2014; Gill, 2014; Heatherington and Zerilli, 2016). They critique how the boosterish language of academic *excellence* disguises the violence of non-stop academic competition. As Rosalind Gill compellingly argues, academic labourers and ‘cultural workers’ increasingly have much in common;

‘including the passionate attachment both have to their work, the endemic precariousness of increasing numbers of lives in both fields, extreme time pressure and long hours, and persistent structural inequalities that are obfuscated by a myth of egalitarianism’ (Gill, 2014, p. 24).

I would like to imagine that when authors receive word that they are being published in the CDJ that they are able to take time to celebrate the affirmation of their work’s quality and the access to new readers that it affords. However, I am concerned that in the current academic climate – I speak particularly of an Anglophone one that appears to be expanding its hegemony across the globe – there is little time or tolerance for celebratory pauses between achievements and bursts of creativity. As universities and research centres embrace the drive to compete, to build international reputations, to climb the rankings, it can appear that the pursuit of academic excellence is a veritable road to nowhere. Once it is published, each new league table or research assessment exercise immediately becomes dated, as institutions fix their attention on a securing a better standing next time round or at the very least holding their position. Once writers have been published, they too are expected to turn their attention to their next output, funding stream or research contract. Even as I write this, I am conscious of how enmeshed I am within this culture of performativity-measurement. My relationship with citation indexes and related metrics is deeply ambivalent; knowing that colleagues need to ‘evidence’ their impact in order to have some hope of a life beyond precarity; while also knowing that citation measurement is a deeply flawed indicator of intellectual quality¹.

¹ See Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne’s (2017, p. 966) article for a thoughtful analysis of the politics of citation and its exploration of the potential for us to ‘rethink citation as a form of conscientious engagement, rather than a metric of impact, excellence, or assumed authority’

This critique of contemporary academia is no elegy for the halcyon days of the past. Universities have never been bastions of equality and their histories are closely bound up with enduring legacies of class, patriarchal, racialised and imperial power. Rather, as Massimo de Angelis and David Harvie (2009, p. 25) explain, we are witnessing the extension and intensification of efforts to ensure that the ‘immaterial’ ‘labour of higher-education workers is quantified and compared and, through this, managed and disciplined’. And in this respect, academia is not unusual because, as de Angelis and Harvie recognise, this compulsion to measure and manage ‘immaterial labour’, is discernible across a range of economic, cultural and social spheres - including community development. For example, Gary Fraser’s (2020, p. 445) recent article in the CDJ documented and analysed how, in Scotland, neoliberal reforms and the diffusion of managerialist practices have constituted a type of ‘neoliberal community development’ that is characterised by ‘new discursive repertoires’

whereby managers and practitioners regularly discuss their “work” in terms of “measuring outcomes”, “improving outputs”, “promoting best practice”, “promoting sector leading practices”, “benchmarking”, “quality assurance”, “better outputs”, “continual improvement” and being “BOLD” (better outcomes leaner delivery).

Similar dubious boasts are being echoed across academia. Neoliberal reforms have brought into sharper focus the extent of universities’ - as well as the culture industries’ and community development’s - existing and potentially deeper imbrication with the capitalist mode of production. This has resulted in a degree of symmetry between the conditions and contexts for academic labour, for arts and cultural practice, *and* for community development work: a realisation that might encourage those of us who are employed in those fields to seek out common tactics for survival, resistance and even revolt, while still endeavouring to establish broader and deeper alliances with other workers.

Commenting on the affective consequences of competition and impact measurement, Mark Fisher (Fisher and Gilbert, 2013, p. 92) diagnosed how increasing numbers of contemporary workers experience profound and ongoing anxiety because our ‘status is never fully ratified; it is always up for review’. For academic and community development workers, there is much to be gained from recognising our shared predicament as people who perform labour and whose labour is performative. We labour in fields where organisations’ grandiose claims often obscure the anxieties and contradictions being navigated by those on the ground; where the workplaces’ imbrication with neoliberal capitalism is typically effaced or ignored.

Against this, we can try to challenge the orthodoxy that ‘excellence through competition’ is the code by which we should live and work. In its most exciting forms, community development seeks to do this by collectivising aspirations, confronting hierarchy and nurturing solidarity. Critically engaged academic scholarship can contribute ways of reading, seeing, writing and talking that simultaneously learn from and embolden such praxis. But, crucially, that praxis cannot be focused on other imagined communities ‘out there’ in need of our salvation. Our own institutions and workplaces are potential sites of/for struggle, politicisation, and collective action too, as are the conditions of academic writing.

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This issue contains a timely and important Themed Section that interrogates the status of community development – and its theory and practice – within social work education. The Section’s guest editors Catherine Forde, Deborah Lynch and Athena Lathouras have assembled a fascinating set of papers that analyse the potential and urgency for social work students, educators and practitioners to more actively engage with critical forms of community development. Contributions integrate learning from Catalonia and Spain (Anleu-Hernández and García-Moreno), India (Vyas) and Finland (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi) to reflect on how related programmes, pedagogical approaches and curricula might confront issues of socio-environmental and ecological crisis, poverty and marginalisation, and the diffusion of neoliberal policies across social and educational spheres. As well as providing an Introduction that frames and contextualises the Section, the guest editors elaborate the guiding principles for a renewed community development pedagogy in social work education; one that is critical, relational and connected (Lynch, Lathouras and Forde, 2021). The affordances presented by digital communication and social media to collective action and community building has emerged as a research concern in the CDJ (Matthews, 2016; McCabe and Harris, 2021; Westoby and Harris, 2020). Themed section contributors, Jay Marlowe and Laura Chubb expand this scholarship, drawing on digital ethnographies to interrogate how social media – its negative features notwithstanding - might facilitate solidarity, mutual support and place-making for groups who have experienced displacement and forced migration.

In the Regular Articles, Max Stephenson and Laura Zanotti invoke Michael Polanyi’s concept of ‘tacit knowledge’; knowledge that is distinctively contextual and relational, the persistence of which belies many of the doxas of neoliberalism. Acknowledging traditions of social/self-organisation in rural Haiti, they focus on the organisational form and tacit

knowledge of the '*konbit*'; how it can be mobilised to support subsistence farmer's incomes, social relations and livelihoods, but cannot be expected to promote 'resilience' in the face of deeply rooted inequalities and asymmetries of power. Yufei He and Ernest Wing Tak Chui also discuss rural communities and livelihoods, specifically the 'embeddedness dilemma' as it manifests through the social economy movement in rural South China. That dilemma refers to how 'economic development should be embedded in social, cultural, and ecological development' but typically is not. Their study interrogates the 'active' and 'passive' forms of 'social reproduction' that constrain a well-known social economy project in Chunxi village in its efforts to mitigate the impacts of marketisation.

Siobhan Daly and Michele Allen assess the potential for innovative research methods, such as the walking interview, to enhance our understanding of the meanings community-based volunteers attach to volunteering and place. Detailing the processes through which they engaged with five volunteers, they consider how such methods may capture 'daily routines and practices', 'chance encounters', emotions and affect, as volunteers navigate the 'multiple spaces' of their communities. Rescuing the word radical from commonplace associations with violence and 'extremism', Oonagh McArdle explores the views of Irish community development workers regarding if/how they self-identify as radical practitioners. Her interviewees' raise doubts about the validity and utility of binary oppositions between radical and professional or conflict and consensus approaches, while also highlighting the personal, intellectual and strategic resources that support their own practice.

A focus on rural areas is again present in Bill Slee's Reflections piece, where he draws on his professional and research experience to offer a thought-provoking assessment of what we have learned from thirty years of the LEADER programme in Europe. In the Book Reviews Patrick Bresnihan and Niaz Khan discuss two recently published books that urge us to rethink conventional understandings of economy, society and environment. The books contest the subjugation, reification and trivialisation of the 'environment' in so much policy and practice, and they emphasise the need for collective responses in the face of ecological crisis and climate change. And finally, Peter Westoby's review of Patricia Wilson's 'The Heart of Community Engagement' welcomes a book that presents a range of stories of social change from across the globe but, crucially, which also gives 'a voice to the difficult parts, the failures, the bits of community development where things didn't go as planned, as hoped for'.

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