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Dark Clouds On the Horizon

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Abstract

In the face of our current political and economic environment, particularly in the context of education, community and arts, dark clouds on our horizon have fast become storms. Storms raining down on us in the South Pacific with a force and subsequent devastation that is soul destroying. Some days I feel we might be in the eye of the storm and other days a glimmer of light sparkles off the rain from the aspirational agendas of UNESCO and our international organisations. But most days, it is dark clouds and storms. Thundering requests for more evidence, gales of economic cuts poorly disguised as enhancement projects, and rain that no arts educator can withstand alone. Where is the sheltering umbrella for a dancing academic in the university? This presentation is a critical autoethnography of hope embodied, a practice of withdrawing to the shelter in my own skin to survive this storm.

Part one: Dark clouds on the horizon

Yesterday and the days before had been cloudy, foggy with doubt and unanswered questions. Perhaps they might find some way to re-count or discredit my work? Perhaps I have not performed well enough? (Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws & Davies, 2011). I know that committees scrutinise not just our publications, but also inspect the reputation of the publishers of our books, of particular journals, the length of articles, whether performance works were selected into a festival or self-produced, whether book chapters appear in books edited by close colleagues, and the international accessibility of our publications. Research indicators like the Performance Based Research Funding (aka PBRF) have become so very important, not just as "disciplinary mechanisms (although they are certainly that), but are increasingly [as] the site around which workplace politics are being played out" (Larner & Le Heron, 2005, p.854). Sitting in these committees recently, albeit in considering the first round of the promotion process rather than the final, I'd discovered just how internalised and normalized it has become, to compare academics against each other (Larner & Le Heron, 2005; Whelan, 2015). The PBRF system measures outputs and collates lists that can be compared. But it does not provide "a rich, well rounded, complex portrait of a research life" that offers meaning and honors the complexity of our knowledges and sophistication of our representations (Roberts, 2013, p.35). However, the work of committees is more 'efficient' when lists rather than complex portraits can be compared.

Today, as the morning meetings dragged to inevitable and inconclusive ends, my niggling doubts began to intensify. Walking across campus at the mercy of the accumulating rain clouds, I pondered the time I'd invested, even before the introduction of PBRF, into arguing for dance research to be counted. I'd made the case to distinguish, for example, between performances of existing works and the choreography/ composition of new works, the latter evidencing embodied scholarship as well as skilful artistry. I had been strategic in my publishing and diligent in compiling evidence. All this, while redundancies in the arts and in education continued (Giroux, 2010; Roberts, 2013). To stay in the academic world there seemed no escape from performativity and I've been dutifully

"compliant and appropriately responsive" (Whelan, 2015, p.12; Lawn & Prentice, 2015; Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Roberts, 2013; Whelan, 2015). It seemed that "research becomes not an integral part of one's being as an academic—the manifestation of a desire to know—but a matter of survival. This can prompt a certain creativity but it can also lead to conformity… In constantly producing for others, we simultaneously reconstitute ourselves" (Roberts, 2013, p.40)

And finally, the letter folded inconspicuously in a regulation envelope, I read the outcome. Small points of lightness spread under my skin, a private celebration that I'm just itching to share with my family. That afternoon the Dean sends a congratulatory email to the Faculty to share the news. A close colleague and I savour a cup of tea in our staffroom, quietly sharing the warmth of success. I return my teacup to the kitchen, I'm almost knocked down by another academic I barely know. As I politely step aside he says, "I hear you got promoted. I guess they are giving them out now". Later, I force myself "to think of encounters such as this as discursively shaping realities, not something to be taken personally" (Brunila, 2015).

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Part two: Some one told me

In the gaps between the comments, somehow my subconscious supplies me with these words from John Fogerty's (1970) song "*Some one told me long ago, there's a calm before the storm"*. I'm grasping at the meaning while I wait. Repressing my immediate responses to the tightening mouths, averted eyes, shifting in seats, pessimistic tones, frustrated sighs, I hold the space for my colleagues to express their opinions. But across the table I almost see the skin of some of my colleagues crawling. How are we supposed to do research in this world of 'publish or perish' with this constantly increasing pressure of teaching and administrivia? (Roberts, 2013, p.34). How much time must be dedicated to entering data? (Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale & Pickering, 2010). Can't the data auto-populate from other university databases? Will the data be kept confidential, given that it's not accurate anyway? If teaching workload is quantified, shouldn't there be a more comprehensive system that also considers all administrative and service roles

too? Will this data be combined with our research output data? Will this effect promotion applications?

Choking on misgivings, I eventually interject into the torrent of questions that "I am well aware of the scepticism and resistance many of you feel towards the use of this Workload Manager programme. But I have been instructed to use it. I can tell you that I will make every effort to reflect as accurately and as meaningfully the workload associated with your teaching. I have a draft of next years teaching already and am now planning to meet with you individually when there is a particular need and to help address the number of papers for which there are no longer teaching staff. I will have to discuss the papers for which there are no longer teaching staff but I intend to avoid asking you to add teaching if your workload is already optimal or if the paper is likely to be cancelled. The way I have been instructed to gauge how close your workload is to optimal is through using Workload Manager and we are entering student numbers and teaching hours now …"

I almost can't believe these words just made it out of my mouth. Swallowing hard, I knew I had to say this, my personal doubts lodged down my throat for now. I had checked my position description again before our staff meeting. It stated that satisfactory performance will be demonstrated in acting at the direction of the Dean. Whelan commented that, "neoliberalism hijacks the moral goodness of good academics, their collegiality, in order to get them to do what they know to be wrong" (Whelan, 2015, p.12). But here I am, choking on my own performance (Brunila, 2015).

"It's a much more sophisticated tool", the Dean had explained to me, "allowing us to calculate not only the equivalent fulltime students [affectionately known as ETFs] and the funding this brings against each staff member's teaching but also the hours involved in teaching. It provides useful detail to consider and should inform your decisions as Acting Head of School about teaching allocations next year."

I understand the point about the need for tools for decision making. But I struggle to see how this standardised process of measurement can really represent the art of teaching in the radically different settings in which my colleagues and I teach. And, how do I foster equity, promote critical pedagogy

and encourage genuine collegiality, and at the same time introduce Workload Manager that will compartmentalise and repackage our teaching (Larner & Le Heron, 2005)? Have I become the instrument of my own demise, cajoling my colleagues into and martyring myself by accepting more workload? (Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws & Davies, 2011). I do understand that workload models

> "are not simply calculations to measure who is doing what, they also send strong messages about the 'right' amount of time to spend on a task. Similarly, performance appraisals are both a key means of ensuring accountability and a signal about appropriate behaviours. In this regard, these techniques have become powerful mechanisms of self-regulating performativity." (Larner & Le Heron, 2005, p.845)

Of course, most of my colleagues want none of this new system. When Workload Manager is finally and painstakingly populated with data as required, I report to my colleagues that I will prepare and hand-deliver personalised and confidential printouts of their teaching workload calculations for them to check. When one colleague remarks simply, "Oh I don't even need to see it Karen", I barely manage to close my office door before a kind hysterical flood bursts through my skin and threatens to wash me completely away.

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Part three: The calm before the storm

Apparently, we in the south Pacific have been fully engaged in this unnamed project of neoliberalism over the last 30 years (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale & Pickering, 2010; (Lawn & Prentice, 2015). According to Lorenz, "the societal relevance of the universities demanded by critical students [of the 60s and 70s] was turned on its head [in the 80s] to become economic relevance to business and industry in the knowledge society" (2012, pp.599-600). As our moral responsibilities have been eroded by these insistent winds from the West, we too have become increasingly "constructed within a market-driven rationality that abstracts economics and markets from ethical considerations" (Giroux, 2010, p.185). While exactly what 'neoliberalism' refers to has been a matter for much debate (Whelan, 2015) and I certainly do not

understand it all. Unwittingly however, I been seduced, imagining that the pursuit of academic individualism was some kind of freedom. Even as fragments of the (arguably) neoliberal agenda began to cohere into repeating patterns of change, I did not recognize how much this increasing measurement, competition, risk and rationalization (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.249; Lawn & Prentice, 2015; Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws & Davies, 2011) would affect the climate around me and my own wellbeing. Thinking of myself as performing as a good academic, I have realized that I had become part of the process of implementing difficult changes, regardless of whether these changes are neoliberal or not (Whelan, 2015).

In his address to Faculty staff late last year, our Dean painstakingly laid out the layers of change we currently faced, relating to dropping student enrolments, curriculum enhancement and new degree architecture, implementing the re-structure of our Faculty from seven departments into three schools, new systems for managing staff workloads, the ongoing review of our initial teacher education programmes, new expectations for PBRF evidence portfolios, greater requirements for external funding, the reduction in overseas conference leave funding, new systems for online readings and course information for students and even more (Lawn & Prentice, 2015; Whelan, 2015). And finally, the announcement that we all witnessed the Dean struggling to articulate, that there would have to be substantial redundancies to bring our staff numbers down to an economically sustainable level against the number of EFTS and to meet the expectations of our new university leader's staff to student ratio. The Dean concluded by describing the situation as 'the perfect storm'.

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Part four: A feeling in my bones

Searching for those scintillating moments even with a 'weather eye' on those dark clouds, I affirm my commitment to accessible arts education as a "fundamental and sustainable component of a high quality" education from which we can and do apply "principles and practices to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world"

(http://www.unescohkied.org/seoul-agenda) Our government, as a UNESCO member state signed up to these goals too – stated in the Seoul Agenda. I've often thought that my purpose as an educator is to empower our students to become critically conscious, engaged and response-able members of our families, communities and societies, who will contribute to creating a more just world (Olsen, 2002; Shapiro, 1988). It happens that critical feminist pedagogy in the dance studio is the means through which I nurture our students, encouraging them to accept the role of critic and conscience of society (Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale & Pickering, 2010, p.93). This role is clearly stated in our *Education Amendment Act 1989* (162): that alongside being repositories of knowledge and expertise, offering research-led teaching, meeting international standards and advancing learning to develop intellectual independence, we academics are also expected to act as 'critic and conscience of society' (Harland, Tidswell, Everett, Hale & Pickering, 2010, p.86). This expectation is also written into our academic contracts. So though it may feel uncomfortable, or even dangerous "to critique one's own institution, it is crucial to do so to work against neoliberal, discourses that privilege competition… othering, and profit over critical analysis" (Taber, 2014, p.15; Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws & Davies, 2011). And yet I do see the bigger picture: I am here performing dutifully in yet another academic context in which I (hopefully) demonstrate my scholarly capital and accumulate further research outputs: "writing the critique of neoliberalism as a solidarising social practice" (Whelan, 2015, p.13).

To really understand and take action, to fulfill our roles as critic and conscience, we do need time for thinking and asking questions, contesting the systems, for enjoying uncertainty, pondering alternatives, creatively seeking solutions, and celebrating successes. We need collegial contexts in which we gather and genuinely participate in communication, collaboration and critical inquiry (Roberts, 2013). In short, we have to keep a weather eye out, attune ourselves to the smell of rain and the aches of the coming storms in our bones. However, we need to be exercising agency (Brunila, 2015), not merely participating in "critical university studies" (Whelan, 2015). Just perhaps, it is "possible to transcend the dualistic order of compliance versus resistance, and take up the master narratives as opposed to resisting them" (Brunila, 2015, p.7).

Just perhaps, between compiling evidence portfolios and responding to economic cuts…

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Part five: Soaked to the skin

I'm under the weather,
I didn't smell the rain coming,
Those petrichor bubbles blew away unnoticed.

I'm a faulty barometer,
I missed the changing pressure,
The spatter of achievement concealed the measure.

I'm repeating the acts,
I'm complicit, even if with grace,
So eager I am to participate.

I'm caught in the schism,
Ill health and ill winds, neoliberalism,
In the calm before the storm.

I know, some one told me long ago,
I look to the west, feel the ache in my bones,
And I know, its been coming for some time.

I'm wondering,
I'm rubbing up against the world,
Critic and conscience, is that still me?

I'm stretched thin,
Clinging to hope,
Sharing knowledge through my skin.

But I'm worse for the weather,
Not walking in the rain anymore,
Just wet, soaked to the skin.

And I want to know,
Have you ever seen the rain
Coming down on a sunny day?

* * *

For my colleagues.

(Acknowledgments to John C Fogerty, Creedance Clearwater Revival, for the song '*Have you ever seen the rain'* 1970).

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