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## **Context and Background**

The year of Utopia, 2016, is a perfect time for provocations in higher education. This paper aims to provoke debate on the practice of higher education curriculum based on Bourdieusian concepts of *illusio*, and *field* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and Levitas's (2013) *utopia as method*. As Levitas states: "*The (utopian) task is to imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable deeper and wider human happiness than is now possible.*"

## **A brief comparison of three related fields – schools education, higher education and the workplace**

Firstly, this paper contrasts three related fields: schools education, higher education, and the workplace, with reference to Bourdieu's *illusio*, or sense of the game. Bourdieu (1992) defines *illusio* as the "*tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game and as practical mastery of its rules.*" and that a defining characteristic of a field is "*the specific profits that are at stake in the field*".

In schools education in Australia, the documented curriculum is developed by government, and although there is some flexibility in its enactment, the specific "*profits that are at stake in the field*" are well-defined. The curriculum outcomes are measured by state or national exams which compare students, schools, and teachers. Both teachers and students have relatively limited curriculum autonomy.

Within workplaces, the *specific profits* are financial, with promotion often a proxy for the financial. Again these are easily measured. Risk and failure can result in job loss, and/or business failure. Autonomy is restricted by both financial requirements and the constraints of stakeholders.

In the field of higher education, most academics would share the view that the specific profits include promotion, recognition, publication, and awards. For students, passing a course, good grades, and eventual employability are well understood profits.

However, we maintain the university context is a relative utopia in terms of the curriculum and learning possibilities, yet, in our experience as academic developers, many academics and students are unaware of their autonomy. Bourdieu (1992) describes the phenomenon of perpetuating established practices metaphorically, "*when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water"; it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted.*"

To demonstrate the utopian possibilities we present the following examples.

### **1. Equitable and creative utopias - Inclusion, diversity, and innovation, in everyday groupwork**

Our research on subtle gender discrimination demonstrated the dominance of a small number of individuals in group processes. Framed with Bourdieusian reflexive sociology (1992), we were able to demonstrate to students how their normal group practice was both silencing individual

contributions, often women, and limiting the creativity of the group. We have now worked with academics and students in a number of contexts, using disruptive utopian activities to ensure that all students have the opportunity to contribute creatively, that their contributions are acknowledged by others in their group, and that the group output is a synthesis of the contributions of all group members.

What is notable about this initiative is not the innovation. In this case the utopian activity is subtle, practical, uses everyday materials and can be taught successfully by other academics. The critical element is the acknowledgement by both students and staff that “normal” academic practices are perpetuating “normal” dystopian work practices and for that reason, invite disruption.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, we suggest that common assessment structures which grade the group output tend to encourage naturalised non-inclusive processes that students have developed throughout their schooling. In contrast to teamwork in the workplace, where the final product has a financial measure, we maintain that the profits at stake for students are their own individual learnings. This means that rather than assuming a team role which will exploit their strengths, students may be encouraged to develop their own reflexivity and actively assume roles that will allow them to develop areas of weakness. The university student experience may be structured to encourage risk. Students are not fired.

For academics, the utopian disruption is the shift from assessment of the group output, to assessment of individual learning - for example, assessment of individual reflective representations of student learning within a group process, and self and peer assessment. In a utopian curriculum model, there is no reason why a student could not receive an excellent grade for a well presented reflection on a failed risky project.

## **2. Ethical and Sustainable Futures - Embedding ethics and sustainability throughout a business degree**

In a major redesign of an undergraduate business degree, a team of academics engaged in collaborative processes, including retreats focusing on ideal, (utopian) curriculum models, extensive consultation, a critical review of business and management education to embed the learning and assessment of ethics and sustainability throughout a degree. This was undertaken in the wake of the global financial crisis, amid claims of culpability of management education to the GFC (Delves-Broughton, 2008) (Light, 2009). Although utopian ideas were eventually modified for feasibility with the large student cohort of 1500-1800, the student experience was significantly changed. From their first subject, students are required to create business concepts within ethical and sustainable constraints. The best groups have presented to industry panels and some students have been awarded mentorships in business incubators.

### **Implications for a more utopian future**

As a closing provocation, we ask: “How would we design curriculum if we viewed our students as stewards of a complex utopian future, rather than graduate employees?”

In our work, we aim to build the capabilities of students to become utopian agents of change for their futures. Most importantly, we view the higher education curriculum as the mechanism to disrupt the perpetuation of dystopian workplace and social practices through developing academics’ understanding of curriculum possibilities and the extent of their autonomy within the field. At the same time we acknowledge students as adults who are capable of making significant decisions about their own learning needs as they progress through their studies, and as people who have a more significant stake in the future than those who teach them.

## References

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