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NOTE: Presenter Withdrew. Building communities in academia as academic activism

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Academics have been tasked with being the critics of the conscience of society, which provides the springboard for various ideas and forms of activism. This critiquing task also applies to ourselves as academics and where we work: academia and the university. In this presentation, we turn the act of activism inward into academia and explore how academic activism takes place through community-building work. In particular, we use examples of community-building efforts in an edited book to examine how community-building serves the *infinite games of academia* and facilitates *slow tiny acts of resistance (STAR)*. We demonstrate how community building helps rewrite the rules of academia while creating a place for resistance, reflection and reimagination.

Full paper

Academic activism and infinite games

According to Harré and colleagues (2017), academic activism "aims to document, subvert and ultimately rewrite the rules" of the current conditions in academia so we can strive toward a better one. They argue academic activism "springs from and serves the infinite game" (Harré et al., 2017, p. 5) – a game whose purpose was "to keep the game in play and invite others in" whereas the purpose of the finite game is "to win" (Harré et al., 2017, p. 12). We argue that communities and community-building work foster infinite games because they often open a place for play where there is no game to win. If the neoliberal academy is plagued by the audit culture of efficiency and "measurable outputs", community building is probably the opposite of it: it is far from efficient and the "outputs" – if at all – are often unpredictable and hard to measure.

In our forthcoming book on building communities in academia, there are eight "case studies" of community-building work that illustrate to some extent the idea of academic activism. Three examples are presented below to demonstrate our points.

The first example comes from Alternative Internationalisms, a group of early career researchers (ECRs) facilitated by Andrew Gibson and Taina Saarinen. Driven by their experiences with the "harsh and sometimes dehumanising demands of academia", Gibson and Saarinen seek to build a "critically supportive community" of ECRs to "offer an alternative to existing, oppressive modes of being in academia" (Gibson & Saarinen, 2024, p. 143). In ignoring the "way things are done" that often promotes hierarchies, competition and perfectionism, they deliberately build a community underpinned by collegiality. Instead of "careful career positioning and CV-padding", they emphasise genuine interest in scholarship and supporting others. They also encourage sharing ideas in progress, collegial feedback sharing and giving, and embracing the vulnerability of revealing the messiness of unfinished work. Both believe that this small community "can produce some cracks in the system, providing possibilities for humanizing academia" (p. 152).

Another example is the Research Whisperer (RW) community diligently cultivated by Tseen Khoo and Jonathan O'Donnell since 2011. Motivated by what they saw as "toxic manifestations within [academic] cultures", both have strategically designed and used RW blog and social media platforms as instruments to "level the research career playing field" by sharing knowledge and advice openly and freely to researchers (as opposed to keeping them locked in the neoliberal institutions). RW is a vehicle for their resistance and activism – to seek "subversive ways of knowing the academy and to encourage researchers to play the 'infinite game'" (Khoo & O'Donnell, 2024, p. 110). Both believed this community-building effort is grounded – and at the same time works toward – the belief that "academia can be a better place".

Finally, an example of the infinite game is illustrated by Vesna Holubek and Henna Juusola, who run monthly online coffee meetings for the Finland-based early-career higher education researchers' Network (ECRN). Through peer support and information sharing, this informal academic community provides spaces for professional growth and wellbeing by nourishing "a more collaborative working culture in academia" (Holubek & Juusola, 2024, p. 74). In the context of increased competition, casualised contracts and uncertain career opportunities, Holubek and Juusola highlight how "the atmosphere of kindness nurtured in this network can alleviate stress and professional ill-being" (p. 83). There is no game to win and no clear outputs to be expected in this type of community. Instead, the purpose is to facilitate a sense of belonging and "sincere and often personal conversations" that "enable safe spaces for peer learning as individuals try to make sense of their professional paths" (p. 77).

Conclusion: Community building as a STAR

We see community-building as an act of resistance that facilitates a “constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourse” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 687, cited in Anderson, 2008). Through this process, individuals are forced to reflect on the tensions in their context and identity to find new meanings and understandings. The examples above demonstrate an uneasiness or even frustration with the reality of academia, which propelled actions on the part of community builders. The STAR philosophy seems to work for the ongoing, immense task of striving to make academia a better place. This task requires time, patience and persistence, but it doesn’t mean it can’t be tackled by small, meaningful acts of resistance, especially the company of others “whom we enjoy and whose thinking and conduct can teach us” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 12).

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