

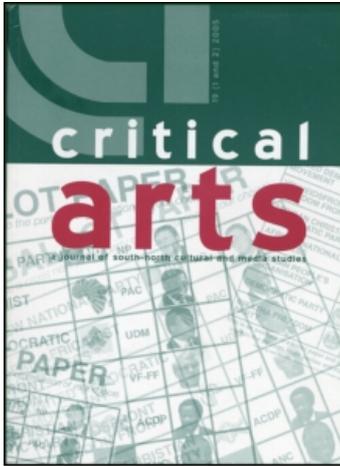
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Academic managerialism in the art and design school

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Short commentary: under fire Academic managerialism in the art and design school

Patrick Lynn Rivers

As the United States (US) financial sector experienced ‘meltdown’ in 2008, a different but not unrelated ‘meltdown’ continued its decades-long impact on art and design education in the US. Seemingly hanging in the balance has been culture itself, rationed so that it becomes a source of conformity, not critical dissent.

Symptoms of ongoing ‘meltdown’ in US art and design education at the tertiary level are many. Rising costs have continued to threaten access. This has come just as the recent economic reshuffle, largely manufactured in the US, has led to a decrease in student bursaries and student employment opportunities used to defray cost. Delayed progress towards degrees and diplomas – if not complete cessation – has followed. Also, central administration’s talk of ‘financial exigency’ has hung in the air along with the possibility that ‘shock’ treatment – as Naomi Klein (2007) might describe it – will follow. This ‘shock’ has included academic management unilaterally taking drastic steps, like abolishing tenure, increasing teaching loads and institutional service requirements, all while actually and effectively cutting pay, hiring contingent faculty to do what tenured or tenure-track academics once did, and feverishly introducing new online courses (even in art and design schools) in the name of ‘efficiency’.

That these challenges confront students and faculty at US art and design schools should not be surprising. Managerial changes in US higher education fall well within what Pierre Bourdieu dubbed the ‘essence of neoliberalism’ (1998) operating at a global level, where managerial ‘flexibility’ underlies managerial decision-making.

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This ‘flexibility’ helps to constitute a rationale in which the basis of ‘quality’ in teaching, research and production can be quantified via almighty ‘metrics’.

The trend towards managerial flexibility in US art and design schools has included a heightened vigour for translating for-profit sector management techniques into not-for-profit higher education. Responsibility-centered management (RCM, sometimes referred to as responsibility-centered budgeting (RCB)) is one technique from the for-profit sector now at home in not-for-profit tertiary education in general, including even art and design schools. (On RCM, see Nelson & Watt 1999: 221–224.) RCM, as its proponents argue, permits more alignment between authority and responsibility. In terms of authority, administrative units receive more (but not ultimate) day-to-day control of their own affairs. It is basically a kind of devolution, in which the day-to-day running of an administrative unit, like an academic department, nominally reverts back to that unit. Power supposedly moves from a central source, like a central administrative structure, to a site closer to the actual administration of ‘product’, like a department of writing or visual communications. (RCM managers actually use this ‘product’ terminology, along with ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘enterprise’, ‘investment’, ‘market’, ‘value’, while designating students as ‘clients’.)

While academic units closest to the delivery of ‘product’ receive more authority, they also become more responsible for their own resource disposition. For example, an academic unit like a photography department assumes responsibility for the generation of its own resources. These resources come in the form of, for example, grants and fellowships as well as the generation of student credit hours (which translates into revenue via student tuition and fees), all of which largely means more cash for that academic unit. There is, in short, a reward for ‘creating value’ that funders want, or that art history or ceramics students want and for which they pay tuition and fees. For permanent academic staff this theoretically means higher pay, more funding to pour metal casts, release time from teaching, more support staff, travel funds, new equipment, or a better desk or studio space.

There is a catch: if an academic unit earns its keep, and then some, it keeps the booty. Units, though, that cannot pay for themselves ... well, their ledger runs in the red. But that is not the end of it. Those in the black with a surplus actually survive, while those in deficit disappear. And this type of ‘responsibilisation’ so very much in tune with Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ (1991) epitomises the insidious character of neoliberalism as it increasingly unfolds in tertiary art and design education in the US and elsewhere. Why? Pointedly, whether or not an academic unit stays or goes depends not on the unilateral judgement of a central academic administrator as manager, but on the academic unit itself. In short, the academic unit, responsible for itself, governs itself, potentially out of existence if it cannot yield a profit. So don’t blame management; blame the ‘free market’.

For art and design, the ramifications of this ‘enterprise’ are troublesome. This ordering of resources ultimately restricts the production and formation of culture, especially in art and design schools that value interdisciplinary inquiry. Highly interdisciplinary art and design educational settings make it possible for learners – students and instructors – to come to a place like The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I am a faculty member, with commitments to photography, yet rather easily slide into making installations significantly drawing from architecture, video and performance. In my case, I am a political scientist trained in a relatively traditional disciplinary programme. I now find myself, at a school placing a premium on interdisciplinary scholarly and studio practices, thinking about how figurative painters epistemologically think of space and how this epistemology might enhance the study of politics of race and racism (2008).

This type of inquiry becomes difficult in an academic setting where, with RCM, there is a hyperconcern with who gets what, so that those who generate revenue get rewarded, while those who do not generate new ‘value’ are punished and systemically eliminated. Along these lines, my research and writing will not directly or readily increase the rate of revenue generation at an art and design school, or at any tertiary institution, for that matter. In the neoliberal art and design educational context, greater ‘value’ is attached to upmarket gallery shows, not community-based art and design at the intersection of performance and sculpture used to critically evaluate, for example, gender and patriarchy, sexuality and heterosexism, ability and ableism, and their intersections. Even greater ‘value’ has accompanied design education, leading to the design professional producing the shinier mobile device that replaces (and can be sold at a higher price than) the old but still very usable mobile device. This has been what too many art and design educators ‘value’, as opposed to art and design studios dedicated to, for example, conceptualising and creating mobile devices that are inexpensive, reliable and democratic. (Of course, the companies that have underwritten studios in art and design educational settings are more interested in the shinier mobile device than the device where use value trumps exchange value.)

RCM in theory seems more workable at a large research university than at an art and design school. This is the case because RCM largely depends on revenue generation from grants and patents more likely to be awarded to engineering and medical schools within research universities. A framework like activity-based budgeting (ABB, see Wells 2002: 63–75) appears more applicable to the art and design school because it is less driven by unit devolution and more likely to be dependent on tuition revenue. But, now, design education, increasingly severed from art, looks more like engineering and medical education as yet another factory for the training of capital’s knowledge producers.

'Value', though, is a funny thing. This peculiarity struck me in a recent communication with a colleague who was a senior central administrator and still is a senior faculty member at a highly regarded US business school. (By the way, this business school recently inaugurated an educational partnership with a nearby leading art and design school.) My contact with the colleague revolved around her new research interest on just what 'entrepreneurs' and 'entrepreneurship educators' in particular should know about social media (also known as 'consumer-generated media' and 'user-generated content'). And this social media ranges from something as all-encompassing as MySpace (owned by Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch), to something less involved, like picture sharing on Flickr (owned by Yahoo!). I wondered how I might be of help, since the social media courses that I had taught several times largely rested outside 'entrepreneurialism', which I associated with business, capital, and, now, academic managerialism. The colleague, though, asserted that, for her, 'creation of value' included entrepreneurialism devoted to changing the world through progressive (not-for-profit and for-profit) activism.

That entrepreneurialism includes progressive activism and regressive capitalism connotes something quite cultural studies about academic managerialism. Particularly, 'entrepreneurial' is an empty signifier, and this can include the 'entrepreneurial' deployed by academic managerialists using RCM as an incentive (or a stick). This suggests that 'the entrepreneurial' of academic managers can operate in much the same way as my friends in molecular biology thought of their own work in gene therapy during the 1990s. Entrepreneurs, that is, like molecular biologists during the 1990s, are not very thoughtful and ultimately care little about the ethical and ideological dimensions of their work, as long as their underlying rationale is realised.

Considering this, I wonder whether or not it is acceptable to tactically and strategically appropriate the language of academic managers to forward progressive ends in an art and design educational context. Before answering definitively, I must say that we live in a historical moment when academic managers interestingly sell us Barack Obama 'change', but in reality offer us John McCain 'same'. This is the case even when Obama's change and electoral mandate was all about repudiating the neoliberalism and 'Washington Consensus' that constituted McCain's same.

Taking cultural studies tools with me to the frontline in an art and design educational context, where 'meltdown' and 'shock' threats linger, where 'shock' in particular can be sold as something other than regressive, I remember that purity of politics making it hard for us to bring into being our own 'flexibility' (along with not always paying attention to where every penny went) helped bring us to this political place where we find ourselves.

Political pragmatism that includes ethical financial accountability and a little bit of the trickster in us offers a way to stem (if not undo) academic managerialism in art

and design education in particular, and higher education in general. So, saying ‘yes’ to madame vice-chancellor, disguising the progressive so that it might survive, might include constructing affirmative action as not just being about redistributive justice; it also creates value, speeding a flexible response to demographic change, prompting the hiring and admission of diverse populations reflecting the multicultural needs and desires of those seeking social products offered by the state and not-for-profit organisations, as well as commercial products offered by the for-profit sector.

So, saying ‘yes’ to mister university president, disguising a besieged justice might lead us to tout community-based art and design curricula not just because it is democratic, but because it is a recognition of the fact that the emergence of new ‘starchitects’ will be few and far between – especially at a time when supply and demand necessitate more resource allocation bolstering everyday social design, as opposed to the design of iconic museums and symphony halls.

So, saying ‘yes’ to ms. trustee or governor of the tertiary institution, disguising what is right might lead us to articulate a vision of interdisciplinarity justified not just because it makes possible new ways of knowing, but because it is like venture capitalism, where informed risk opens up new forms of competitive advantage and new sources of return.

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