

# Creativity versus routinisation: Critical reflections on the role of the learning adviser

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**Abstract:** *How do learning advisers keep alive a creative and critical edge in the work we do? A compulsion for students to make rapid progress is built into the experience of academic learning in the contemporary tertiary environment. In response to this we can find ourselves teaching routinised procedures that will help students get through their assignments as efficiently as possible. However, this kind of teaching may be achieved at the cost of a certain creative and productive chaos that is an important part of learning. A thoughtful response to this dilemma requires us to maintain a critical engagement with the educational context in which we operate. We need to continue to reflect on what it is we are aiming to achieve, and what education more generally is for. In a practical sense, we need to find ways of teaching that keep rich and valuable processes in play, even as we attempt to pass on neat packages of skills. The cultural studies literature on education (Giroux, 2004; Horner, 2000; O'Shea, 1998) reminds us of the critical and transformative value of our work. From the field of cognitive psychology, Claxton's (1999) understanding of the qualities of successful learners suggests a productive framework for positive change. In response to these diverse literatures, this paper presents a negotiation of the tensions between productive chaos and premature control, patience and haste, and creative vs. routinised teaching.*

**Key words:** *creativity, cultural critique, learning advisers*

## Introduction

This paper reflects critically on the beliefs and values that underpin the practice of learning advising. It asks how learning advisers can keep alive a creative and critical edge in the work we do, which appears to suggest that our creativity and criticality are flagging. In fact this is probably not the case. Indeed, given the increasing recognition of the value of our work for student success and retention, things may never have looked better for the learning adviser's creative contribution to education.

At the same time, however, there are larger ideological questions at stake in contemporary tertiary education, which has become increasingly market-driven (Readings, 1997; Barnett, 2003; Burwood, 2003; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). This impacts on the work that learning advisers do. In particular, neo-liberalism's market orientation functions to commodify education (Horner, 2000; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Universities are being linked with the needs and demands of the marketplace; they are to contribute to an entrepreneurial culture that will guarantee the economic future of the nation, seemingly at the exclusion of any desire for more fundamental social change that might transform existing hierarchies of power (Giroux, 2004). There is an increasing focus on identifiable and measurable outcomes that can be tagged to the skills required to service economic growth (Moore, 2004). The consequence is that the potentially transformational capacity of education, its potential to change student, knowledge and society, may be undermined.

In raising such issues, this paper reflects on the intellectual and ideological conditions in which learning advisers operate and the kinds of teaching we do. In undertaking such a reflection this paper suggests that we might learn from those disciplines within the academy that self-consciously and critically reflect on the assumptions built into their own intellectual practices, such as cultural studies. The critical project of cultural studies is two-fold; in the first instance it aims to 'challenge specific institutional fixities' (O'Shea, 1998, p. 518). In this sense, the discipline of cultural studies challenges the workings of power in order to analyse 'how objects, discourses and practices construct possibilities for and constraints on citizenship' (Nelson & Gaonkar, 1996, p. 7). Citizenship, in the cultural studies framework, is not limited to formal political participation, but is concerned with a broader sense of how people experience their place in the world. Thus the second element of a cultural studies critique is an effort to identify possibilities for different ways of being and acting that may allow people to 'change their context for the better' (Grossberg, 1996, p. 143). It involves fostering 'an optimism of the will' that allows alternate possibilities to be recognised and valued (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Grossberg, 1988, p. 286). Such a two-fold approach can enable us to ask productive questions about the work that we do as learning advisers, and consider possibilities for a resourceful response to the challenges of contemporary higher education.

## **Market-driven education and learning advising**

The massification of higher education over the past three decades has led to numerous institutional changes, such as the modularisation of courses and increased internal assessment. Many of these changes were initially designed to facilitate access to higher education by a larger and more diverse student group and to improve the quality of tertiary teaching (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). A side-effect of these changes, however, has been increased pressures on all students to undertake more tasks, and more complex tasks, in a shorter space of time. At the same time, financial pressures produced by the rising cost of education and the limited availability of a living allowance mean that students of this generation are more likely to work longer hours in paid employment than their predecessors. The consequence is a framework in which students are continually rushed and always thinking under pressure. To this picture must be added the challenges faced by students from non-English speaking backgrounds, for whom the pressures of the learning load are frequently multiplied.

In this pressured and high-speed learning environment learning advisers must assist students to come to terms with multiple and complex tasks as quickly as possible. We do so, it might be presumed, out of a desire to improve students' chances of succeeding in higher education and reaping the ensuing personal benefits. Learning Advising, at least in the centre where I work, has an ethic of social transformation at heart. Te Tari Awhina is the Learning Centre at Unitec New Zealand. Te Tari Awhina's *kaupapa* (policy or rules of operation) states that we are committed to 'equity of educational opportunity' and that we recognise 'that equal outcomes often require unequal inputs' (Te Tari Awhina, 2004, n. p.). Fundamentally, we are motivated by a desire to help students get what they came for and to contribute to more equitable outcomes for structurally disadvantaged students. In this sense we do basically operate out of a critical pedagogy that is interested in social transformation (Giroux, 2004).

Such a pedagogy may well be in conflict with the neo-liberal agenda that organises higher education today. In particular, the notion that speed and efficiency, which are central requirements of commercial enterprise, should likewise apply to teaching and learning is of concern. It is understandable that, because students are so pressured, and because learning advisers are interested in assisting them to get what they came for, we try to find ways to make complex tasks graspable. In the interests of efficiency, but also out of a desire to help students cope with the demands and the essential foreignness of the tertiary environment, we find ourselves teaching things like a stepped process for essay writing. We continually try to boil down complex activities to their essential components in order to make them comprehensible and accessible to our highly pressured audience. In doing this work we have any number of 'how-to' guides at our fingertips, including published study skills manuals, resources on the web, and material that synthesises published work with our own teaching and learning experience.

Such an approach seems almost forced upon us by the commodification of education, which Naidoo and Jamieson (2005, p. 271) define as 'the transformation of educational processes into a form that has an economic worth of its own and has an "exchange" value rather than an intrinsic "use-value".' In other words, learning is no longer valued for its own sake as a form of human development that makes for a well-functioning society, but is utterly indexed to economic outcomes for the individual and for the nation. In this context teaching staff are made into 'commodity producers' and students conceive of themselves as 'consumers' (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 271). Thus constituted, the participants in teaching and learning may seek to formalise complex processes with routinised frameworks that promise to bring such processes under control.

### **Making complex processes explicit**

A couple of examples might serve to make the point. The first is Cottrell's (2003) seven-point procedure for writing assignments and the second is Davis and Parker's (1997) systematic approach to writing the doctoral dissertation. This is by no means a definitive survey of the literature; these are merely two examples that represent particular strands of study skills advice. One addresses the beginning writer in thoughtful and useful ways, the other the advanced student as competent practitioner, but what they have in common is an attempt to give form and structure to complex activities.

Let us begin with Cottrell, who lists seven processes that need to be worked through in writing an assignment (Cottrell, 2003, pp. 152-3). It is perhaps unfairly blunt to represent these processes as a simple list, since each point is explained and expanded with further bullet points, and supported by the much larger discussion of the book as a whole. However, in outline, the steps are as follows:

1. Clarify the task
2. Collect and record information
3. Organise and plan
4. Reflect and evaluate
5. Write an outline and first draft
6. Work on your first draft
7. Final drafts

At each stage there are points of clarification, further tasks, or questions to be answered, but what is described are a number of decision-making, reflective or evaluative processes that might assist a beginning writer to find his or her way through the maze of ordering evidence into an argument.

Cottrell's work provides an excellent introduction to the skills required for tertiary study and I do not mean to suggest that the seven-step model is flawed in itself. Rather, my aim is to trouble the faith that learning advisers often seem to have in such frameworks. For although it would be nice, and nicely efficient, if learning were to proceed along such orderly stages, the kinds of creative and critical thinking that higher education claims to value may well involve more disordered processes. These processes may include all kinds of apparently time-wasting activities such as getting side-tracked, circling round and getting busy doing a hundred other things, or simply having ideas that one intuitively feels are related but which do not initially seem to connect up. All these chaotic states might be vital parts of the learning process and essential to the work of moving beyond taken-for-granted assumptions that innovative and inspired thinking demands.

To further problematise lists like the one taken from Cottrell's book, it may even be the case, as Claxton (1997, 2000) suggests, that making complex processes explicit is not necessarily helpful. Polyani provides an argument against the provision of explicit instruction in the form of maxims, or pithily worded-truths:

Maxims are rules, the correct application of which is part of the art which they govern . . . Maxims cannot be understood, still less applied, by anyone not already possessing a good practical knowledge of the art. They derive their interest from our appreciation of the art and cannot themselves either replace or establish that appreciation. (1958, as cited in Claxton, 2000, p. 35).

In other words, study skills advice looks good to those of us who already know how to do the activities involved, but it may be the case that, as Claxton (2000, p.36) puts it, 'explicit knowledge cannot be easily converted into practical know-how'. This perspective runs contrary to the common practice of making learning processes explicit that organises much of our work, which involves the development of metacognition, or 'thinking about thinking' (Devlin, 1995, p. 8). However, it may be the case that we are unhelpfully requiring students to prematurely impose order on their learning. Given time, and the

encouragement to be patient, students might discern through their own eyes how order is fashioned out of apparent disorder. We may do a disservice to students in our efforts to shortcut such slow-moving processes.

Our task should surely be to offer a range of possible strategies, rather than a single prescription. Routinised forms of instruction necessarily seek to avoid the kinds of disordered processes students frequently find themselves delayed by. Yet, within the speeded-up context of contemporary higher education, encouraging students to slow down and value less obviously productive states might be a useful intervention that learning advisers could make. Claxton (1999) argues that successful learners are able to demonstrate resilience, reflection and resourcefulness. Resilience indicates an affective capacity to persist in one's learning even when the going gets tough. Reflection involves thinking over and examining what has been more or less effective in one's study practices and making appropriate adjustments. Resourcefulness, according to Claxton, means being able to draw on a range of possible cognitive strategies to tackle different problems. Learning advisers work in all three areas. We encourage resilience by providing support to the struggling student, and we teach the metacognitive skills of reflection. But we might encourage students to draw on a wider range of cognitive resources. By emphasising structured and orderly procedures we may teach students to distrust what Claxton (1997, p. 2) terms more 'contemplative or meditative' forms of thought. Such unfocused, fragmentary states are largely undervalued by a pedagogy that emphasises focus, deliberation, argument and problem solving. These are clearly valuable *outcomes* of academic analysis, but they may not provide good models for the *processes* of critical and creative thinking.

## Hard thinking and soft thinking

My second example takes us further into these questions. Davis and Parker present a highly rational model for thesis writing that is intended to 'assist doctoral candidates in completing a better quality dissertation in a shorter time' (1997, p. v), invoking the imperative of speed that organises even advanced scholarship. They describe the thesis as 'knowledge work' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 25), which is 'human mental work performed to generate useful information' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 26). Then they set out a number of strategies for increasing productivity in knowledge work, which are listed as follows:

1. Improve motivation
2. Improve task management
3. Conserve attention
4. Reduce errors and omissions
5. Eliminate redundant processes

Each strategy is elaborated over one or two pages which describe both the practical activities and the attitudinal orientations that are required in order for the student to be efficient and effective in carrying out and completing his or her research. For example, dividing the project into manageable stages which can then be timetabled 'reduces wasted time and improves synergy among activities' (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 30). Similarly, redundancy is to be prevented by having a thorough and comprehensive plan for every stage of data collection and analysis, so that the entire project is brought under cognitive control from the outset.

This advice seems eminently sensible and practical, and it reflects a great deal of the literature that is available on thesis writing in that it attempts to reduce what can be an overwhelming and highly disordered process to something logical, rational and controllable. Davis and Parker's model is basically an injunction to get on with the job, and to avoid getting side-tracked, losing focus or wasting time. It is highly product-oriented and it describes an expectation that the process of advanced research will mirror the product in so far as it demonstrates what Claxton (1999, p. 123) describes as 'hard thinking'. Hard thinking, as Claxton (1999, p. 123) explains, 'derives inescapable conclusions from valid arguments that draw out the implications of premises that accurately and completely capture a state of affairs.' When such highly ordered and rational thinking is presented as the only desirable approach then slower, more exploratory and often more chaotic aspects of thinking, learning and writing are precluded, possibly at great cost to creativity and criticality.

As a supplement to the conscious, rational, deliberative approach Claxton (1999, p. 146) offers the notion of 'soft thinking'. Soft thinking is more contemplative than deliberative and more dreamy than deductive. It is particularly useful when the definitions or parameters of a given problem are not clear. In such cases, the issue is often one of finding a new way of conceiving the problem, rather than solving it. In this foggy, unstable territory hard thinking may be the least useful approach; or rather it only becomes useful later, after one has had recourse to some soft thinking. Soft thinking involves paying attention to insights, hunches and complete guesses. It requires patience – the ability to sit with a difficult problem over time without attacking it too directly or losing sight of it entirely. Indeed a premature attempt to crystallize problems or one's thinking about them can be entirely counterproductive.

If tackling complex problems requires the slow thinking skills of tolerating confusion and lack of focus and if being able to think in sophisticated ways about the consequences and implications of the solutions we come up with takes time, then teaching packages of skills that help students to impose control and proceed more quickly may not facilitate creative transformations of thought and may only encourage routinised learning. Effective teaching needs to do justice both to the complexity of the tasks involved in learning and research and to the time involved. What is needed then, are measures to slow down learning within the speeded-up context of contemporary higher education.

## **Slowing down and the practice of learning advising**

I do not mean to suggest that we should withdraw the provision of skills instruction, nor even that we should cease to make the requirements of academic discourse explicit. As learning advisers we should continue to offer our students packages of steps to be followed in response to their demand for skills they can pick up in the drive-through world of contemporary higher education. Clearly, 'how-to' guides can be useful: students like them and they form a useful basis for teaching that is frequently much more nuanced and interactive in practice. But we should offer these on the understanding that such routinised frameworks might be more comforting than enabling. Packages of skills can be useful props or pointers on the unfamiliar road our students travel, but there are no shortcuts to creative and critical thinking. It is important that we continually trouble the notion that the good advice of routinised 'how-to' instruction is adequate in itself.

An example that demonstrates the contrast between good advice and a more productive approach is the question of procrastination. Given the value this paper has accorded to slow thinking and the time needed for creative and critical thinking, the perennial issue of procrastination presents a useful example of the gap between advice that is designed to speed up learning through routinisation and other, less reductionist, possibilities.

Procrastination, or the inability to get on with one's work, is a distressing experience and it seems an unquestioned good that students should learn to minimise it. Guides to tertiary study often include a section on time management that advises students to establish routines; make a timetable and stick to it; break a larger task down into smaller, achievable steps; and to increase motivation by setting goals and rewarding their achievement. This is all good, sound advice. Yet in my experience many students (and many learning advisers) find such advice very difficult to follow all the time. Might such anecdotal evidence suggest that the failure is not entirely in the student, but in the advice itself?

Procrastination carries with it a host of rather culturally specific moral judgments, so that the procrastinator declares themselves to be lazy, undisciplined, lacking the strength of will to shirk off the compulsion to delay. Yet, procrastination is not simply a function of poor willpower, nor an unwillingness to follow good advice. Kachgal, Hansen, and Nutter (2001) address the complex nature of procrastination and propose a multi-faceted approach to overcoming it that takes into consideration both students' understanding of and practical approaches to the tasks they must carry out, as well as the emotional and self-management aspects of the learning experience. More interestingly, however, Chu and Choi (2005) introduce the possibility of a positive type of procrastination, termed 'active', in which students may use procrastination to manage their workload. Chu and Choi (2005) suggest that active procrastinators are flexible and able to continually adapt their timetable to respond to new demands, an approach that would appear to be very useful in the pressured context of contemporary tertiary education.

It may also be the case that the models of timetable management and goal setting that learning advisers advocate frame certain delays as inappropriate when they are, in fact, highly productive forms of waiting. Valuing the kinds of unfocused and contemplative thinking mentioned earlier may allow students to trust processes of working through and problem solving that are not fully amenable to inflexible timetabling. Sometimes the delaying tactics of reorganising one's work space, cleaning the kitchen, or even just going for a walk can allow a small epiphany to take place. Such 'aha' moments may require a minimisation of self-beratement for the unscheduled delay in order to be fully received.

My advice to students is to treat procrastination as an interesting problem, rather than as a moral problem. An interesting problem deserves thoughtful engagement, so that we might inquire into the nature of the delay, or even ask ourselves whether there are good reasons for waiting. Thus students might learn to trust processes of contemplative working through that are not entirely under cognitive control. Indeed, procrastination may allow thoughtful and creative responses to intellectual problems to emerge, an approach that seems utterly at odds with the focus on measurable outcomes that education is required to demonstrate today. Coming up with solutions to problems that include what Claxton (2000, p. 39) terms 'a holistic perception of the problem in relationship', rather than responding out of taken-for-granted assumptions about the factors involved, is a process that takes time. For these reasons an overemphasis on strategies designed

to foster discipline may not facilitate creative transformations of thought and may only encourage routinised learning.

## Conclusion

In addressing the relationship between creativity and routinisation this paper has attempted to forge links between the speeded-up context of higher education, the market-orientation that drives it, and the work of the learning adviser. Although we may be called upon to provide easily assimilable skills, it is debatable whether or not such skills are always useful for students. They may even function to obstruct slower and more disordered processes that are an important part of learning. Furthermore, encouraging students to think that there are proper and orderly ways to proceed might obstruct the development of their own ideas and practices.

To this end, learning advisers might trouble the notion that packages of skills are helpful and instead see ourselves as points in the constellation of instruction at which students are invited to slow down and think about what they have been asked to do from a fresh angle, to ponder the dimensions of a problem and to think about the consequences and implications of the response they come up with. Such an intervention might be a way in which learning advisers can hold onto an understanding of the intrinsic value of learning that is not first and foremost linked to economic imperatives. Valuing the time it takes to develop creative and critical thinkers, we should resist the routinisation and ready answers that a commodified understanding of education seems to entail. If students need to become 'skilled', then perhaps it is equally or more important that they become authorised to fashion their own response to the context in which they find themselves. The anxiety and lack of confidence that plagues many students, especially non-traditional students, might be alleviated by encouraging trust in the chaos and discomfort of the process.

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