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Critical educational praxis in university ecosystems: enablers and constraints

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ABSTRACT

Universities serve several important functions in society today through research, education, and community engagement, not least helping people to live meaningfully in society and create a world worth living in. A kind of practice that seems particularly important in fulfilling such responsibilities is *critical educational praxis*, a social-justice oriented, educational practice/praxis, with a focus on asking critical questions and creating conditions for positive change. Yet, the contemporary university is not exactly a *niche* for critical educational praxis. There are practices and arrangements within higher education that make the enactment of critical educational praxis challenging. This paper explores this concern by explicating the notion of critical educational praxis and examining enablers and constraints for critical educational praxis drawing on an empirical study conducted in one university setting. Our aim is to prompt consideration of the kind of university ecosystems currently being created, and the implications for academic communities and society.

KEYWORDS

Praxis; critical educational praxis; higher education; university conditions; higher education pedagogy; ecologies of practices; practice theory; cognitive capitalism; marketisation of education

Introduction

In recent times, higher education has been subjected to turbulent forces that have changed universities significantly. These forces include the explosive growth of information technology, globalisation, the massification of education, and the marketisation of education, conceptualised lately as the emergence of the knowledge economy (Peters and Besley 2006). The changes such forces have brought with them have presented many challenges for higher education, challenges that prompt reflection upon the role of universities in society and what might be needed in universities to deal with them.

One of the functions of universities is to *prepare people for working life*. Today, however, the concept of work is also under radical change. In order to prepare people for the world of work, we ought to know what working life will look like tomorrow. Yet it is impossible to predict the future and we must therefore rely on being informed by developmental trends. Work is apparently becoming increasingly immaterialised; to a growing extent work is about processing information and knowledge. In pre-industrial

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times, work was associated with physical and bodily exercise. In the early stages of industrialisation, as human energy was replaced by the use of fossil-fuelled energy – for example, through the combustion of coal and various types of hydrocarbons – the emphasis shifted to energy. There was a further shift in the latter phases of the industrial revolution with general-purpose technology being based more on new ways of utilising information and communication. Since then, an emphasis on knowledge processing has increased to the extent that the driving force behind the contemporary economy and production is human capacity to apply, modify, and utilise knowledge. There are direct implications of this for the relationship between education, working life, and production. Nowadays, much attention in university education is focused, for example, on developing the cognitive potential of the future workforce.

This relates to the *knowledge generating* and *economic functions* of universities, the latter of which is emphasised now to a greater extent than previously (Välilmaa and Hoffman 2008). Universities are regarded as providers of knowledge and a capable workforce for economic benefit. However, universities also serve functions which go far beyond societies' material and economic needs, and which are seemingly overshadowed today. Universities have a *civic purpose*: to educate citizens who are able to participate meaningfully in public life, thereby forming a society characterised by a healthy, 'inclusive democracy' (Giroux 2010, 190). Put another way, universities have a responsibility to foster the *good life* for humankind; to help people 'to live well in a world worth living in' (Kemmis et al. 2014, 27).

This function of the university brings us to concept of *praxis*. *Praxis* may be described as a form of deliberate action in the social (and physical) world based on critical and reflective thinking. It is about acting in the world in a way that contributes positively and meaningfully to society, or acting in the interests of humankind. In *praxis*, the impacts and consequences of action are carefully considered. As crystallised in the words of Kemmis and Smith (2008b, 4), 'praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what it is best to do, they act.' We (authors) suggest that, in order to fulfil their civic purpose, universities need to foster *praxis* and a capacity for *praxis*. And in order for this to be possible, there needs to be space within universities for the educational practices that constitute higher education to be realised as forms of *praxis*.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in *critical educational praxis*, which can be defined as a kind of social-justice oriented, educational practice/*praxis*, with a focus on asking critical questions and creating conditions for positive change. *Critical questions* may include questions, for instance, about overcoming injustice or questions aimed at liberation from oppressive ideologies. *Critical educational praxis* is about reflecting critically on the mechanisms of social action and arrangements in order that people can emancipate themselves from manipulation and exploitation. We are interested in what makes it possible (or not) for people to ask critical questions, and to teach other people to ask them.

Of great concern to us, however, is that *critical educational praxis* seems to be an endangered species in the contemporary ecosystems of higher education. The forces that we outlined in our opening paragraph have rendered critical educational praxis all the more important today, but also more difficult to enact. What we can and need to do

as academics is create conditions of possibility which together constitute an *ecological niche* for critical educational praxis. This demands that we understand *what enables and constrains critical educational praxis in higher education*, and it is this question that we aim to address in this paper. By doing so we hope to build on important insights generated in the special issue of *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 'Pedagogy, Education and Praxis' (2010, Volume 18, Issue 1), which focussed, among other things, on the importance of, and conditions for, educational *praxis* in a range of educational contexts, and raised questions about how space within educational institutions for educational *praxis* might be reclaimed.

Our discussion begins with the concept of *praxis*. We explore its historical roots in Hellenistic philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, followed by the Post-Marxian notion of *praxis* advocated and further developed in the critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School. This allows us to explore the critical dimension of *praxis* and leads to an elaboration of *critical educational praxis*. Next we expand on current preoccupations in higher education, and then introduce the practice-ecological concepts that frame the discussion, especially the notion of *niche*, taken from ecology and from the theory of ecologies of practices (Kemmis et al. 2012; Kemmis and Heikkinen 2012). This theoretical framing is followed by a discussion of empirical findings from a study where university teachers were asked about the conditions of possibility for critical educational praxis as well the constraining conditions for it. The empirical study, conducted as a collaborative inquiry in a particular Australian university, provides concrete examples of enablers and constraints for *praxis* in higher education. We conclude the paper by considering ways of responding to concerns raised in the discussion.

Theoretical background

What is praxis?

Before elaborating on what can constrain and enable critical educational praxis in higher education, we think it is important to say more about *praxis*, starting with Aristotle's view on knowledge and action. According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of disposition towards knowledge (*epistēmē*, *technē*, and *phronēsis*) and three corresponding forms of action (*theoria*, *poiēsis*, and *praxis*). Aristotle's *epistēmē* is based on a disposition to seek only universal and eternal truths where, ideally, the world around us is seen as through the eyes of the gods on Mount Olympus. This form of knowledge is theoretical knowledge, and was regarded as pure knowledge in the sense that the knowing subject has no aims or aspirations other than just knowing how things are (Aristotle 2011, 1139a27-8). The form of action associated with *epistēmē* is *theoria* (contemplative action), the original Greek meaning of which was *seeing* or *watching*. An ideal researcher was considered to gain an objective and universal relationship with knowledge that is true regardless of time and place.

For the disposition towards knowledge to produce material goods, Aristotle used the term *technē* (Aristotle 2011, 1094a5-10). *Technē* is the disposition towards knowledge that is needed in making or producing something; that is, *poiēsis* (making action). The term *technē* finds expression in the modern concepts of technical knowledge and technology. Technical knowledge is not valuable in itself; its significance can only be assessed through making and producing products. It is 'good' and valid only if it helps to

produce usable and appropriate objects or services or to develop methods that can be used to produce them. The disposition towards knowledge of a technically-oriented person is thus linked to finding effective means of achieving his or her goals. In this sense, technical knowledge is instrumental: its aims are external to the knowledge itself.

The third disposition towards knowledge identified by Aristotle (2011, 1140b1-6) was *phronēsis*. Often translated as practical wisdom, *phronēsis* is the disposition to seek/know how to live a meaningful, happy, and worthy life together with others, that is, how to live a 'good life'. *Phronēsis*-type knowledge (*endoxa*) is thus a prerequisite for *eudaimonia*, a flourishing and worthwhile life. *Praxis* is the form of action (doing action) associated with *phronēsis*. This kind of human action is about living a virtuous life through choices and action based on judgements about what is wise and 'right' in everyday dilemmas and situations.

In *praxis*, unlike *poiēsis*, the goals and means of activity cannot be separated; *praxis* is an end in itself. Alasdair MacIntyre (1990, 188–196) encapsulated this idea in the concept of the *internal goods* of a practice. *Internal goods* refers to the positive achievements, emotions, or outcomes enjoyed through engaging in the practice. In terms of professional practice, examples might include personal or professional development, satisfaction in action, or positive social relations achieved through collaboration. In short, internal goods are essential elements of a 'good' professional life; professional action as *praxis* is, itself, rewarding. In contrast, *external goods* are the results or products of action and are enjoyed after or outside of the action. Thus they are associated more so with action characterised as *poiēsis*. External goods of practices in higher education might include money, prestige and social status, promotion, and academic qualifications, awards, and grants.

From a *praxis* perspective, a core purpose of higher education is to foster understanding about how to live a good life, and to allow human flourishing and living a meaningful life together with each other, outlining the place of humans in the universe, in the cosmos (Kemmis and Smith 2008a). This is what *praxis* is about; it enables a good life for all. If people mainly aim at achieving external goods in their work as educators, then their action is something other than *praxis*. Action oriented towards external goods in education might be more appropriately called *educational poiēsis*, whereby action is informed by *technē* rather than *phronēsis*. Some, however, might consider this an oxymoron on the view that this kind of action is not *education* at all, but rather *schooling*.

The dispositions and associated forms of action outlined above are not separate entities. On the contrary, they are interconnected in many ways. In order to live a good life, we need the ability to observe and see, understand and interpret the world (*theoria*), as well as utilise techniques, materials, and natural resources (*poiēsis*) for the good of humankind (*praxis*). However, it is *phronēsis* that ought to guide education most, making theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) and technical knowledge (*technē*) subordinate to practical rationality (*phronēsis*).

What is critical educational praxis?

In addition to these three forms of disposition towards knowledge, we may add a fourth (after Kemmis and Smith 2008a) – *critical disposition* – based on Habermas's (1972) knowledge constitutive interests and his articulation of a 'critical-emancipatory' disposition. A critical disposition is a disposition to expose belief systems and categories that

maintain an unreasonable and subordinating power over people. The purpose of such exposure (i.e., generation of critical insights) is to enable people to be released from the mechanisms of power that oppress or harm them by affecting, for example, their capacity for autonomous thinking and agency. From this perspective, the social world is understood as a struggle for power.

The form of action associated with this fourth disposition is emancipatory action (Habermas 1972; Kemmis and Smith 2008a), or ‘empowering action’ (Heikkinen and Huttunen 2017). This amounts to ‘collective critical reflection and action to overcome irrationality, injustice, suffering, harm, unproductiveness or unsustainability’ (Kemmis and Smith 2008a, 23). It is ‘collective’ in the sense that it transpires in reflective communication and interaction with others. It is also transformative in that it leads (ideally and simultaneously) to changed circumstances and self-change. This form of transformative action can be understood as *critical praxis*, which combines Aristotelian *praxis* with post-Marxian interpretations of *praxis*. The notion is captured in the third thesis in Karl Marx’s (1845) *XI Theses on Feuerbach*:

The materialist doctrine that men [sic] are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated... The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary praxis.

Table 1 shows the dispositions and forms of action described above, and highlights the relationship between these and *praxis* and *critical praxis*. It is important to note that the line between *praxis* and *critical praxis* is blurred; the critical edge of *praxis* can be regarded as an essential element of *praxis* itself, understood as participatory agency in the social world. Arguably, *praxis* is inherently critical in the sense that it is ethically/morally informed, and so the qualifier ‘critical’ could be regarded as superfluous. However, ‘critical’ here signifies the possibility of action aimed at *more than* acting rightly/justly and wisely: action aimed at overcoming what is considered to be unjust and untoward. The blurred line between *praxis* and *critical praxis* is illustrated in Table 1 by a dashed line between them, and the arrows which bring *praxis* and *critical praxis* closer to each other.

One way to understand *critical educational praxis* then, is to think of it as *critical praxis* enacted in educational contexts (cf. McLaren 2008; 476, 479; Davidoff 1993; 128; Ball 1992). On this view, it is a form of action informed by critical insights and shaped by a critical disposition. It is action that involves critique, and, where necessary, transformation of the taken-for-granted discourses/ideologies, practices, structures, and relationships that shape and characterise educational practices, and which impede people’s capacity for self-determination, self-development, and self-expression (Young 1990), both within educational contexts and society more generally. Understood thus, *critical educational praxis* in our view is needed in higher education in order to nurture the expression of a critical disposition and capacity for critical thinking, to overcome injustices and anti-educational practices in education, and ultimately to contribute, through education and knowledge generation, to the creation of a more just and sustainable society.

Table 1. A synthesis of the forms of action and dispositions to knowledge of Aristotle (2011) and Jürgen Habermas (1972). Adapted from Kemmis and Smith (2008a) and Kemmis (2012).

	Aristotle			Habermas
		Technical	Practical (hermeneutical)	Critical-emancipatory
Knowledge-constitutive interests (Habermas)				
Dispositions to knowledge (Aristotle)	<i>Epistēmē</i>	<i>Technē</i>	<i>Phronēsis</i>	
Action	<i>Theoria:</i> Contemplation, for example, theoretical contemplation about the nature of things; <i>contemplative action</i>	<i>Poiēsis:</i> Action aimed at producing known ends; <i>making action</i>	<i>Praxis:</i> Action involving practical reasoning about what is wise, right and proper to do in a given situation and in terms of the good life; <i>doing action</i>	Emancipatory: Collective critical reflection and action to overcome injustice, irrationality, harm, and unsustainability; <i>empowering action</i>
Aim (telos)	Attainment of universal knowledge	Production of something	Good life; flourishing; life worth living (<i>eudaimonia</i>)	Overcoming irrationality and injustice
Position of the knowing subject	External observer	Maker or designer of products	Agent in the social world	Questioner, critic (together with others)
			PRAXIS = = = = = →	
			← = = = CRITICAL PRAXIS	

Preoccupations in contemporary higher education

Despite the need for critical educational praxis, its enactment in the contemporary university is challenged due to pressures associated with the *marketisation of the university* (Marginson 2004, 2). Many agree that a market-centred policy logic (Connell 2013), which we (authors) associate with *poiēsis* and a preoccupation with external goods, has penetrated many universities through heightened competition (Davies and Bansel 2007; Nixon 2011); the intensification of academic work (Davies and Bansel 2005; Hartman and Darab 2012); the creation of a performativity culture (Ball 2012); increased accountability pressures (Bleiklie 1998; Shore and Wright 2004); the precarisation of the academic labour (Kalleberg 2009); and the commodification of knowledge and education (Ball 2012; Nixon 2011). These closely-linked trends have often been labelled under the umbrella terms of *neoliberalism* and the *new public management* (NPM). They have also been encapsulated in the term *global educational reform movement* (GERM; Sahlberg 2011) which seems to have spread and infected educational policies all around the globe.

The provision of economically beneficial cognitive skills has become one of the main aims of university education as part of this spread of a market-logic. Since production and economics are based on immaterial information processing, human thinking has become a target of investment, and human ability to handle information is seen as the most important aspect of economic activity. Knowledge appears to have become the primary driver of economic value in the global economy (Means 2011, 212). This is evident today in the discourses of economic operators and is directly reflected in political speech, and in turn, in the discourses of politics and educational policies.

The intensified use of cognitive resources in relation to the economy has been conceptualised through various theoretical perspectives. Drucker (2011) first introduced the concept of *knowledge work* in 1959. According to him, knowledge becomes a more

crucial economic resource than land, labour, energy, material means of production, or financial assets. At the end of the millennium, Castells (1996) launched the concept of the *information age*, and at the same time discussion of the *information revolution* emerged (Chichilnisky 1998; Means 2011; 213–214). The change has also been described as the *knowledge economy* (Chichilnisky 1998; Means 2011; 213–214) and the *immaterial economy* (Cooke, Boekholt, and Tödting 2000).

Some of the conceptualisations are rooted in the idea of capitalism. This is explicit in the concepts of *post-capitalist society* (Drucker 1994); *academic capitalism* (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), and *knowledge capitalism* (Olssen and Peters 2005). In these conceptualisations, knowledge is understood as a form of capital important for economic growth. The concept of *cognitive capitalism* (Peters and Bulut 2011; Negri 2011) adds yet another element to the previous conceptualisations; it turns the focus from information and knowledge as such to the ability of people to deal with information, that is, to the *cognitive skills* and abilities of humans. From a cognitive capitalism perspective, cognitive skills are the most essential factor of production. As a result, the fundamental aim of education is reduced to intensifying those thinking skills that improve and foster economic growth and productivity. Thus, as noted, attention has been focused in higher education on investment in the development of the cognitive potential of the future workforce. In our minds, developing cognitive capacities is important, but, as we have indicated, not the sole function of higher education.

The concept of niche and a practice-ecological perspective

A key element of our theoretical apparatus is the concept of *niche* as used in the theory of ecologies of practices (Kemmis et al. 2014). This theory explores how practices are ecologically connected with one another in living systems (like schools and other practice landscapes – in our case, universities). To survive, a practice must have a proper *niche* in a living system. In zoology, the concept of niche refers to the habituation of a species to its environment. It embraces shapes, textures, and boundaries (surfaces, edges), all of which are organised in such a way as to enjoy affordance-character for the animal in question in the sense that they are relevant to its survival (Smith 2001, 85). More generally in ecology, the concept of niche refers to the distribution of resources and competitors that are necessary for, or permit, the survival of the organism. In terms of human social systems and the practices that comprise these systems, a niche similarly ‘motivates and stimulates’ a practice, ‘providing it with motivations (points of departure), purposes (ends) and the characteristic places and paths in and through which the practice is enacted’ (Kemmis and Heikkinen 2012, 161). Without its niche, the practice cannot be enacted and it cannot survive. On the other hand, some practices appear to build some elements of the niches that support them, such that both niche and practice develop and evolve in interaction with one another (Kemmis and Heikkinen 2012).

In the discussion that follows, we take a practice-ecological perspective and, conceptualising universities as ecosystems, consider how arrangements and practices in these ecosystems do (and do not), or can, constitute a *niche* for critical educational praxis by discussing both enablers and constraints. Examining *praxis* through this

perspective can help us to understand the challenges for enacting critical educational praxis in the contemporary university (i.e., why it has become what we earlier called an 'endangered species' of practice) and what we might need to do about it.

Enablers and constraints of critical educational praxis in higher education

To explore enablers and constraints for critical educational praxis, we draw on a study conducted by Kathleen Mahon into how a group of seven academics' efforts to enact critical educational praxis in their educational work within a particular multi-campus, regional-based Australian university were enabled and constrained by the conditions within their setting. The project was conducted as a collaborative inquiry framed by practice theory – specifically work by Kemmis and colleagues (e.g., Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008; Kemmis et al. 2014), Schatzki (2002), and MacIntyre (1990) – and combining elements of critical participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014), institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), and self-study (Loughran 2004). The participating academics (of varying backgrounds and experience levels, and including Author 1) met regularly as a group (prior to, and for the duration of, the study) to reflect collaboratively and critically on their practices and conditions for praxis. Empirical material was generated mainly through the group meetings, as well as two interviews with each group member and one with two of their colleagues, observations of three group members' teaching practice, and reflective writing by Author 1.

Analysis was based on a critical hermeneutic approach (Kögler 1996), part of which involved diagrammatically mapping arrangements that were prefiguring (Schatzki 2002) pedagogical practice in the setting, and therefore influencing people's capacity to enact critical educational praxis. Arrangements examined in this process included cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) (e.g., policies, staffing arrangements, timetabling, collaborations and committees, discourses) that were part of, or implicated, in the particular university. For instance, at the time of the study, the tendency to employ academic staff on a casual basis rather than in continuing (permanent) positions was increasing, and the faculty (or academy) to which to participants belonged was undergoing a departmental restructure. Both measures were arguably linked to funding pressures felt across the university, as in other Australian universities, due to a long series of national funding policies amounting to declining government funding relative to the growth of student enrolment and increasingly linking funding to 'productivity' (i.e., output and performance) (Hardy, Grootenboer, and Bristol 2016). Although many of the study's empirical findings are site-specific and therefore not generalisable to other contexts, current higher education research strongly suggests that there may be resonances with other university contexts.

The research made clear that there was an extent to which critical educational praxis was enabled and constrained by the capacities and intentions of those who were part of the higher education ecosystem. However, it also revealed constraining and enabling university arrangements, practices, and conditions that existed beyond individual subjectivities. It is these arrangements, practices, and conditions that are brought into focus in this section. We first discuss those identified as enabling (enablers), and then those identified as constraining (constraints).

'Enablers' for critical educational praxis

The research findings highlighted the following enablers in the higher education setting studied: (1) time (especially for interrogating practice); (2) space for creativity; (3) space for autonomy and flexibility; (4) positive, productive, and trusting relationships; (5) rigorous critical dialogue and reflexive conversations; and (6) opportunity for engagement and experience¹.

Time

The study stressed that critical educational praxis involves the kind of creative and complex intellectual work that takes *time*. Time also proved to be important for interrogating practice (cf. Hardy 2010; Hartman and Darab 2012); for engaging in, and building relationships conducive to critical conversations; for coming to understand the situations in which people found themselves; for sourcing and developing critical resources; and for engaging in the kind of scholarly and professional activity needed to act in critically-informed ways. Also crucial was time for imagining (collectively and individually) how things might be otherwise (cf. Hartman and Darab 2012). The participants in the study were not given this time as such, as we discuss below. They had to make (or 'carve out') time in their daily work and lives, for example, by setting time aside for engaging in critical collaborative reflection (such as in the regular group meetings), sometimes after official work hours.

Space for creativity

Creativity emerged in the study as important for seeing beyond the present circumstances and boundaries and pursuing alternative paths which might ultimately lead to better circumstances: in other words, for 'seeing openings in constraints' (Mahon 2016, 17) and visualising action that could lead to change. Space was needed for such creativity and what might be called a kind of critical 'playful[ness]', to borrow from one of the participants in the study. This appeared to be important for making educational work sustaining: 'ultimately for me, there needs to be that level of creativity that I can work with – so having the opportunity to have ideas and to explore ideas and all those sorts of things' (participant comment). Creativity seemed to be fuelled by exposure to diversity and difference regarding ways of seeing and being in the world. This exposure was also important for challenging ideological assumptions about what is culturally formed or 'natural' and what is changeable or fixed (Grundy 1987), and was possible, for example, via scholarship and the kinds of collaborative conversations mentioned above among people with varying backgrounds and experiences.

Space for autonomy and flexibility

Space for autonomy and flexibility to exercise professional judgement and respond appropriately to changing circumstances also emerged as enabling. Of course arguing for the need for autonomy and flexibility in academic work is not new (see e.g., Ball 2012; Blackmore, Brennan, and Zipin 2010). Critical educational praxis presupposes having choices about how to act (Bernstein 1983; Grundy 1987), for, as Aristotle suggests, 'nobody deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise, or about things that he himself [sic] cannot act on' (Aristotle 2011, 1141b10-17). Academics must have

options and openings for courses of action and expressions of agency. In the study, an example of this was flexibility and autonomy within subjects to design and change learning activities to suit the interests of particular student cohorts, and to negotiate aspects of the learning directly with students. Higher education arrangements became 'enablers' of critical educational praxis to the extent that they gave actors such flexibility and/or the space to act autonomously.

Positive, productive, and trusting relationships

The study showed that positive and productive (i.e., fruitful and mutually-enriching) relationships based on respect, sharing, and caring can nurture and sustain efforts to enact critical educational praxis, particularly when conditions are challenging. This includes relationships among university educators, among students, and between university educators and students. As one study participant commented, 'People need to have a sense of being brave and being courageous, but I think that that comes from solidarity'. Solidarity, developed through collegial relationships, was described by several of the participants in the study as important for nurturing agency and people's confidence to act, including acting 'against the grain'. Related to this is trust. Trust was considered especially crucial in terms of people feeling 'safe' enough to take risks and to engage in the kind of dialogue where people could ask and answer confronting questions that might eventually lead to change. The willingness of some of the research participants to ask more difficult questions of students in classes (e.g., related to the issue of racism in the context of discussing inclusive education) where strong, trusting relationships with students had been established was evidence of this (cf. Hardy 2010; and Gibbs et al, regarding 'safe' environments for *praxis*; and Gibbs, Angelides, and Michaelides 2004; for a discussion of *praxis* and trust).

Rigorous critical dialogue and reflexive conversations

Rigorous critical dialogue and reflexive conversations (for example, in classrooms, online forums, and staff rooms) were important for enactment of critical educational praxis in the setting in terms of their role in raising critical consciousness. We might also suggest that they were important for cultivating *phronēsis* and a critical disposition. Through critical dialogue and reflexive inquiry, academics and students had opportunities for developing self-understanding and being exposed to critical insights and helpful stories of social injustice/justice and critical overcoming. They could be challenged to see what was taken for granted, held to account for their views, and prompted to think more critically about their location in, and contributions to, the practices in which they participated or would participate, and to history generally. In other words, they could practise being critical. The regular group meetings of the academics participating in the study, for instance, became a forum for critical dialogue and reflexive inquiry through their processes of examining practices and conditions related to everyday academic work, such as those associated with the departmental structure that became a salient social-political arrangement during the early stages of the study period. In many respects the group became a collaborative professional learning group, and the meetings were spaces for people to regularly share, justify, and constructively interrogate each other's views about what was going on.

The description of the importance of being part of a rigorous professional community by one of the study participants captures the commitment underpinning such critical dialogue. Speaking about her own area of teacher education, the participant referred to the importance of people ‘committed to generating a mass of teachers who are crap detectors... and, themselves ... actively pursuing crap detecting’. By this, the participant implied scrutinising what is said and done consciously or otherwise in order to expose deception, disguises, and masked or distorted realities for what they are and for the potential harm they can do. The description exemplifies how *praxis* can be both enacted and enabled in higher education. Open and critical debate (and ‘crap detecting’!) within higher education is important so that initiatives are properly evaluated, and so that harmful or unsustainable practices and power relationships are understood and changed.

Opportunity for engagement in scholarly activity in a higher education community

...there’s a sort of a mutual inter-relationship between research, reading, talking, collaborating and teaching practice and one informs the other in many ways until the lines become very blurred. (Participant comment)

Scholarly activity within a higher education community emerged as an enabler for critical educational praxis because of the role it played in sensitising participants to particular aspects of their work (for example, the affordances and constraints of working in online spaces, the impact of a departmental restructure on teaching and learning practices). It informed practice, as reflected in the participant comment above, mediating the ways that participants interrogated their practice and prompting the asking of particular kinds of questions. Engagement in such activity, especially in the context of an academic community, promoted understanding of the circumstances, the people involved, and the various consequences and implications of what was going on.

The enablers we have outlined above were instrumental in maintaining and/or creating conditions that made the site a ‘*niche*’ (Kemmis et al. 2014, 37) for critical educational praxis. These enablers are, of course, interdependent. For higher education to be a niche for critical educational praxis, these elements must work together.

As the following section shows, however, there were arrangements that had the potential to erode or undermine the enablers we have outlined, thereby constraining possibilities for critical educational praxis.

‘Constraints’ for critical educational praxis

Constraints for critical educational praxis included (1) intensification of academic work; (2) lack of, or diminishing, contact time between university teachers and students; (3) over-regulation and standardisation of practice; and (4) promotion of particular constructions of pedagogical practice. These elements of the university setting emerged as significant because of their impact on time; relationships; space for creativity, autonomy, and flexibility; and critical dialogue, in other words, their impact on the enablers of critical educational praxis mentioned above.

Intensification of academic work

Study participants raised increasing workloads as a challenge for the realisation of *praxis*. Increasing workloads amounted to having to do more in less time or with fewer resources, as well as mounting pressure to produce measurable outputs (e.g., publications, successful grant applications, good evaluation scores, PhD completions). Many talked about multiple and sometimes competing demands being placed on them (i.e., teaching, administration, research, community engagement, scholarship, and leadership responsibilities). One participant likened her work to an elastic band and described herself being pulled in different directions and stretched by these demands. Arrangements within the university identified as contributing to work intensification included the introduction of a three-session academic calendar (replacing a two-session academic year), cross-campus teaching (in this multi-campus university), increasing casualisation of academic staff, large class sizes, and the high rate of institutional change, linked by another of the participants to 'universities being competitive with one another, with uncapping of places. What's our [competitive] edge? Everybody else is doing it'².

The effect of academic work intensification has been less time and energy for scholarship, reflection, critical conversation (see also Hardy 2010; Hartman and Darab 2012), developing critically-oriented courses and resources, and, crucially, building relationships with people:

Sometimes I feel like you're doing the curriculum but you're not connecting to the people in the classes as well as you should.... I try my very best. But I'm finding that because of these other things that are going on, I'm not doing it as well. (Participant comment)

Other side effects were people tending to work increasingly on their own ('It seems to me that people are working in isolation – everybody' – participant comment), as well as decision making 'on the run' at the expense of democratic process and taking the time needed to carefully consider the potential consequences of decisions for those affected by decisions.

Lack of, or diminishing, contact time

Lack of time, or diminishing time available for teacher engagement with students in any given subject (i.e., 'contact time') was also identified as a constraint for *praxis*. This applied to subjects offered in face-to-face, online, and blended modes. In the university's recent history, the teaching terms had been shortened to allow for three sessions per year, tutorial hours in many cases had been cut from two hours to one, and the practice of rotating lecturers within a subject had increased. Class sizes had also increased affecting the amount of time that educators could spend with individual students. Face-to-face contact time was also being reduced in favour of online alternatives. Not only does reduced contact time impact on the extent to which positive, productive, and trusting relationships can be developed, and whether educators can get to know their students well enough to know what is appropriate for them (e.g., the 'right' critical questions to ask), but also the extent to which certain types of knowledge, such as instrumental or technical knowledge, are privileged:

... this idea that you've got to be applied all the time. It takes time to develop, and it requires thinking time, and we don't – it's not accounted for in our practice any longer. It's not part of what we do. (Participant comment)

Over-regulation and standardisation of practice

Many mechanisms for governing the everyday work of academics were also raised by participants as constraints for critical educational praxis. This ranged from contractual agreements to policies, prescribed procedures, and accountability measures. The 'work-load policy', performance management, quality assurance procedures, employment contracts, subject evaluations, and assessment regulations are some examples. The regulation of assessment in particular, demonstrated the extent to which academic work was 'governed'. There were policies and procedures in place stipulating the type and number of assignments, marking time per student paper, the time-frame for return of marked papers to students, whether a numerical mark or a grade was assigned, timing and means of grade release, the circumstances under which extensions could be granted, moderation processes, who could approve grades, and processes for distributing grades across class cohorts.

Practices were also being increasingly standardised and regulated to meet particular external standards articulated in, for instance, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), and Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS). Excessive regulation of academic work and increasing standardisation has the effect of diminishing academic autonomy and flexibility in terms of being able to make professional judgements and be responsive to the particularities of specific educational situations. It also warps priorities, shifting the focus away from site-specific educational concerns, and creates unconstructive stress for academics. Furthermore, it contributes to a sense of surveillance at the expense of trust and good employer-employee relations, as implied in the following 'us' and 'they' statement:

The thing that is missing in the system is trust... They don't trust us to teach effectively because they're answerable to some other god. So we have to be answerable to these things so they can be answerable to something out in the wilderness. (Participant comment)

Promotion of particular constructions of pedagogical practice

The research showed that critical educational praxis was in some ways threatened by the promotion of particular constructions of pedagogical practice (e.g., rule-following and formulaic practice) associated with an over-regulation and standardisation of practices. It seemed that regulations and standards were having a 'homogenising' (participant comment) effect on pedagogical practices whereby student needs and diversity in teaching approaches were overshadowed by the desire for uniformity, even in the name of equality (e.g., 'If the students here have that experience it's inequitable because the students on the other campus don't' – participant comment). There was also a sense in which the curriculum was being *teacher proofed* (Dunne 2005; Giroux 2010) in order to cope with recruitment issues and the increasing number of staff on casual contracts. The notion of a *teacher proof* curriculum implies that anyone, regardless of education and/or

knowledge and experience, can teach any subject. This, and the homogenisation of practices, reinforces the notion that pedagogical practice is little more than a technical exercise (cf. Giroux 2010; Hartman and Darab 2012), that is, *poiēsis*, and the idea that educators are merely technicians (Giroux 2010) or 'operative[s] of some system' (Kemmis and Smith 2008b, 5). Both notions are antithetical to critical educational praxis. The first ignores injustices created by the denial of difference and particularities of circumstances, and both limit flexibility and room for creativity, professional judgment, and responsiveness in educational practice.

The enablers and constraints for critical educational praxis we have outlined in this section add up to a troubling picture for the university concerned in terms of the site-based survival of critical educational praxis as a species of practice. On the one hand there were clearly aspects of the particular university ecosystem that formed a niche for critical educational praxis. Yet there were other aspects that inadvertently threatened possibilities for critical educational praxis by eating away at the very things needed to sustain and nurture it, some of which were fortunately, but not easily, being addressed and challenged through the ongoing *praxis* of the study participants and their colleagues (for examples, see Mahon and Galloway 2017). The specific arrangements and practices that formed the identified constraints may well be unique to the setting studied. However the story of increasing managerialism, competitiveness, compliance, and privileging of certain forms of knowledge and action at the expense of *praxis* is not so unique, and this has implications for university communities globally.

Discussion and conclusions

What appears to have been happening in university ecosystems in recent years is an 'ecological' imbalance. The study just discussed is but one example. This imbalance is characterised by a distorted emphasis on the economic function of universities, on aspirations to acquire 'external goods', and on the application of the logic of production (*technē*) to many aspects of higher education. On this logic, put simply (although the situation is far from simple), educational work is a means to particular ends (hence constructions of pedagogical practice as a technical exercise described above); academics are producers/technicians; and knowledge – and graduates with a capacity to apply, modify, and utilise knowledge – are end products/commodities. This development, as intimated earlier, has been encapsulated in the concept of cognitive capitalism, which turns some of the core processes of the human mind, learning processes, and education into processes of production. The *market-centred policy logic* which has penetrated universities focusses on optimisation of resource usage in the production process; the aim is to produce the greatest possible added value to the capital with the smallest possible investment of resources, including time.

According to the empirical results of the study discussed above, the question of *time* was raised as one of the most important issues, in different formulations. Time was identified as one of the main enablers of *praxis*, but, contra-factually, lack of time also emerged as one of the main constraints or disablers of *praxis*, explicitly manifested in the form of 'lack of contact time' with students, and academics being expected to do more in less time and with less resources ('intensification of academic work'). Time is one of the limited resources of production, and in the context of education (in terms of

producing more educational products or outputs), the use of time is optimised in the interests of efficient production to meet economic targets. The erosion of time through increased workload and diminishing contact time leads to a rushed pace of work that affects possibilities for nurturing dispositions to knowledge other than *technē*, and also, as mentioned, possibilities for reflecting on what is happening, for critical debate, for building relationships, and for understanding the potential and actual consequences of decisions and actions. This means especially that the critical aspect of practice is endangered due to lack of time.

Time pressures and rushed activity also seem to perpetuate a preoccupation with external goods, compromising the opportunity for work that is meaningful and that 'feels good', that is, practice that induces a sustaining 'state of flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1975) linked to the internal goods of that practice. Academic work at its best involves innovation, the generation of new ideas, possibilities, and things. We wonder to what extent innovation is affected when the pace is so frantic that a 'state of flow' is inhibited.

This kind of 'flow' within the contemporary university seems to have given way to regulatory and standardising mechanisms introduced to increase and control the 'flow of production'. In this scenario, universities are increasingly becoming *niches* for technical and instrumental forms of practice (i.e., *technē*) including technical forms of pedagogical practice while space for academic autonomy, scholarship in community with others, creativity, and the flexibility to be responsive to changing circumstances are being eroded. This compromises the relational, moral, and critical dimensions of educational work: critical educational praxis is severely constrained, we suggest, when people's understanding of their circumstances, capacity to act and innovate, and their 'scope of action' (Edwards-Groves et al. 2010, 50) is diminished.

What is needed in higher education is a restored sense of balance. This requires a re-emphasis on universities as ecosystems of learning rather than merely sites of production, and a re-emphasis on the internal goods of educational work. Consideration of how we might collectively create conditions for enabling 'flow' (since flow cannot be forced) rather than being instruments in the 'flow of production' seems pertinent in this respect. Safeguarding communicative spaces for open, collaborative critical dialogue and reflection, and closely and continuously scrutinising university arrangements to see what is actually happening must surely be crucial parts of restoring the balance.

Contemporary universities are sites of uncertainty and struggle that make this kind of restorative work highly challenging. Some comfort can be gained from the knowledge that current arrangements and practices within universities are not fixed, but changeable. Just as animal species shape the very ecological niches that ensure their survival, academic practices collectively perpetuate and protect, reorient or change aspects of university ecosystems that affect possibilities for *critical educational praxis*, despite the larger forces that penetrate these ecosystems over time. It is how academics respond to these forces in their everyday practice and *praxis* today that will shape the challenges being dealt with, and the kinds of critical questions needing to be asked, in higher education tomorrow.

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Notes

1. A number of specific university arrangements were identified in the study (see Mahon 2014). However, for this paper, we have chosen to focus on broader themes.
2. This *uncapping of places* is a reference to reforms in Australia allowing universities to enrol unlimited numbers of students.

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