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2

The Student Experience

Living Learning, Living Teaching

1

The ancient Greeks posed a problem for learning, asking the very simple question, ‘How can we learn?’ Simple though it seems, this is actually a conundrum. In its most recent formulation, the conundrum was famously reiterated by Donald Rumsfeld, when he tried to make distinctions and discriminations among ‘known knowns’, ‘known unknowns’ and ‘unknown unknowns’. While this may have been linguistically amusing, it nonetheless was addressing matters of grave importance in relation to international conflicts and, yet more pertinently for our purposes, matters of grave importance in relation to military and related intelligence. The question of learning – of intelligence, broadly understood – is a question of profound and substantial importance.

Let us examine the conundrum and its consequences, especially in relation to the actual experiences of learning and of teaching in the University. Either we know what it is that we are after as we try to learn something, so that we will recognize it when we find it; or we genuinely do not know, and therefore we do indeed have something to learn. If we know already, then we are not learning, but rather simply repeating or reiterating the already known. If the latter is the case, and we genuinely do not know, then we may well certainly find something but we cannot know whether it is what we are after, since we did not already know what it is that we are after. To sum up: in the first instance, we do not learn for we already know; and in the second, we may find something by way of answer, but we cannot confirm this as a learning process, for we do not know if we have found what we want or need.

This second case certainly looks more like what we think of as learning: finding out something that we did not already know. However, if we decide that this is indeed learning, then there are now two new and corollary problems. The first consequence is that we have a problem with the validation of learning. Instead of asking simply, as the ancient world

did, 'How can we learn?', we pose the different question, 'How can we know or be sure that we have learned?' This becomes the problem of the legitimization of knowledge; and it will lead us into a kind of eternal regress. Even if we find a satisfactory answer, it will simply generate the next level of questioning: 'How do we know that we know that we have learned something?' The word we give to this potential proliferation of checking and validating (or introspective navel-gazing), in our present predicaments, is 'quality assurance'.

The concept of this quality assurance opens the door to the second problem directly. This second consequence – of our adopting the view that learning is finding out something that we did not already know – is a problem concerning teaching. Someone else (a teacher) must have already known that what we have found is what was already known. It was already known by the teacher, who can now confirm that what has been found is a satisfactory answer for whatever was being sought. But how did the teacher learn this in the first place? Teaching, like learning, now also enters the endless narcissism of self-questioning, submitting to quality assurance in exactly the same way as the process of learning does.

Putting this philosophically and seriously, what happens is that we enter the domain of the Chinese box or Russian doll: a potentially endless regression in an attempt to find the origins of knowledge. How did we first get any knowledge at all? That, of course, is an almost entirely intractable problem. In some ways, it is not a question that is susceptible to any answer; and it is close to what physicists might call the 'non-question' of where the Big Bang came from. However, and perhaps more importantly, the effect of this within an institution is to turn attention away from any *actual* learning and teaching – activities full of real content, full of the content of thinking and of intellectual work – towards an endless monitoring of the *processes* through which we monitor how it is that we *can be assured* that we are learning, and how it is that we *know for sure* that we are teaching. At least we can pretend that we do have answers to this, for we can provide documentation to show that we are always considering it.

Obviously, there is an element of paradoxical thinking here; and it revolves around the implied stability and certitude of knowledge and its objects. If it were the case that 'knowledge' was something that could be parcelled into bits of stable information – let us perhaps call them 'modules' – then it may well follow that such knowledge could be passed on, like a baton in a relay race. We would eventually learn to disregard the problem regarding eternal regression; and we would simply accept and take for granted that what has always passed for knowledge and truth is still indeed what constitutes knowledge

and truth at the present time, just as it did in the past. We would accustom ourselves to 'just how things are', so to speak. One word for this, of course, is tradition; but another way of putting it, as far as knowledge is concerned, is the refusal to think. It is a recipe for docility, for passive acceptance of whatever we are told. We become like the fourth runner in the relay-race, aware only of the present goal, unconcerned about the previous runners except as things that may have disadvantaged us, and certainly entirely oblivious of the big bang at the start of the race.

Further, in this version of knowledge, we are forced to compartmentalize and to establish certain 'levels' of knowledge. If it is the case that we eventually abandon the endless regression of 'How did my teacher's teacher's teacher know this?' then we can only do so by positing some unquestionable self-asserting 'first cause'. In many cases, of course, such a first cause is called God, a kind of infinite 'I am' who, in pronouncing the words 'I am' thereby constructs a world that is outside of God, outside of this first cause, but always dependent upon it. In short, the modular version of knowledge – the view that knowledge has some stable content that can be parcelled into modules and passed on or 'transferred' – is fundamentally theological, even mono-theological; and, to the extent that it is thus theological, it is also incipiently totalitarian. It presupposes a consciousness that transcends all historical reality; and this is an omniscient and omnipresent consciousness that is also effectively divorced from – superior to – any material or historical body.

In a version of knowledge that is grounded in these beliefs, we do not have authority, but rather authoritarianism; and, in many secular versions of this where the State interferes with the independence of institutions of learning and tries unilaterally to shape the content of that learning, the end-result is precisely a totalitarian version of the social. Such a view claims, at least implicitly, that there exists a stable, and indeed monumental, body of knowledge that constitutes the eternally unchanging truth. If you want the truth, look steadily at the existing monuments. The task of the student is to conform to that knowledge, to that truth, and then to repeat it endlessly, in an act whose function is simply to retain the monumental body of truth in an unchanging fashion and to confirm the voice of an earlier authority.

Clearly, this is rather in conflict with the adventurous instinct, not to mention the instinct for critical consciousness, of the human intellect. While some may indeed be content to worship at the monuments of unchanging intellect, others are stimulated into thinking – maybe even into 'begging to differ' – when they examine that supposed stable body

of accepted dogma. Therefore, minor variations are of course to be permitted; and we can call this 'discovery' or even 'research'; but even in this, the activity that we call research becomes nothing other than the eradication of earlier error, instead of the production of the new. We get an even clearer view of the monument, as it were, for our researches have essentially been exercises in either purging us of our erroneous ways or of polishing-up and clarifying yet further the essential shape of the monument.

Perhaps it is better now to rename what I have been referring to as 'the monumental' for what it actually is. The monumental body of the past referred to here is really made up of all those works of art that a civilization claims to possess as markers of its identity. The works have to be rendered 'stable' in terms of their meaning if our own identity is itself to be preserved and maintained, or rendered stable and assured in its turn. That is to say: their meaning has to be controlled and regulated, especially if I am to feel secure in my own identity. Thus, we cannot ever learn anything about them, for we have now fallen back into our first predicament: there is nothing new under the sun, nothing new to disturb what has always been known as truth. In this, the task of the student is to conform; that of the teacher to repeat and 'transmit'. The consequence is that we have no need whatsoever to examine the *content* of the activities of learning and teaching; and we can safely and assuredly turn instead to measuring the *processes* of learning and teaching. If we are to be assured of the quality of this, then what we are looking for is simply conformity to the ideology of knowledge as a stable entity, susceptible to modularization and transmission in parcelled packages or units.

As avowed 'moderns', attentive to the needs and demands of the contemporary, aware of our position as the latest runners in the relay, we might feel unhappy with a view that keeps truth in the past. However, the paradox of the activity of making minor modifications that we call 'research' is that we can still claim an essentially modernizing drive in our intellectual work. The net final result – wherever knowledge has become reduced to the eradication of error or the correction of a previously limited view of things – is the peculiar state of affairs in which 'the now' and 'the new' are identified with 'the true'. This, while peculiar, is also reassuring. It is as if all the peculiar and challenging intricacies of research can be caught in a rather Whiggish view of progress, in which we researchers say, 'Wow! Thank goodness I live now, for at last humanity has entered the realms of the true.' This is the fundamental aspect of what we usually blithely and blandly refer to, in self-righteous and self-aggrandizing fashion, as 'modernization'.

Jonathan Swift satirized this thinking in his comic critique of the 'modern' author in *A Tale of a Tub*. There, his avowedly modern author, driven by the madness of endless 'modernization', is able to make the absurd claim that 'I here think fit to lay hold on that great and honourable privilege of being the last writer. I claim an absolute authority in right, as the freshest modern, which gives me a despotic power over all authors before me.'¹ This is not the Optimism of Alexander Pope, writing that we should assume a certain humility before the world, and accept with Leibniz that 'Whatever is, is right'; rather, it is the arrogant hubris that says instead 'whatever I say is right' and that legitimizes this by an assertion of modernization, of being in the here and now. It is the move that, at a stroke, recharges mere opinion as knowledge; and that claims such knowledge as truth. If two people now claim different truths, we cannot any longer argue about the content of their truths: all we can do, if we wish to seek for a foundational ground on which to choose sides, is to argue about the processes whereby they *know* that they have learned.

If the now and new is also axiomatically the true, we are enabled to suggest that those who went before were less developed intellectually. That is also very reassuring, for in the end it allows me to say that such and such a state of affairs is true for no other reason than that I, here and now, believe it to be true. If I 'know' something in this philosophy, my knowing it makes it indisputable. If you disagree, then you are entitled to your opinion; but, being 'you' and not 'I', *you* only have *opinions* while I have truth on my side. Thus, that great philosophical division that was so central to the Renaissance in Europe – the division between *scientia* and *opinio*, between knowledge and mere point of view – is eradicated. By definition now, *I* (as that which is 'here, now') am identified as that which has truth, while, equally by definition, *you* can only have opinion.

Friedrich Nietzsche, of course, is the philosopher who has done more than any other to help us to see that truth may be relative, or dependent upon point of view. Famously, he argued that 'There is no truth. There are only interpretations'; and, at a stroke in this, he dismisses that paradox of our teaching/learning conundrum that would find its solution in an originary God. However, having said that there is no truth, but instead only interpretations, Nietzsche also immediately adds the statement that, 'This, too, is an interpretation'. The statement logically undoes itself or deconstructs itself in a paradox akin to that of the Cretan liar. That paradox is most easily summed up in the sentence, 'I am lying.' If that is true, then it is false; and vice versa, indefinitely and undecidably.

Likewise, in Nietzsche, it cannot be *true* in any fundamental sense that 'There is no truth. There are only interpretations', for that, too, is but a way of looking at things. In any proper reading of Nietzsche, we retain the angst regarding the origin of truth; and, indeed, part of the point of his philosophy is to make us genuinely *experience* that angst in the unsettling of our minds as we try to deal with the inherent paradox of his statement. However, it is interesting to note, in passing, that our contemporary moment, which often salutes Nietzsche in validating the so-called relativism of truth, is a moment wherein what we actually find is that *all* truths are indeed relative – *except for mine*, which remains absolute and guaranteed and stable. That is to say, we have been very poor readers of Nietzsche.

In the existing model of 'monumental' educational thinking that dominates contemporary discussion of these matters, learning and teaching have become evacuated of any sense. They have become mere formal processes without substantive and material content. As Walter Ong put it some decades ago, in a communication model where interlocutors are seen as 'boxes', one full of a message and the other patiently attentive to its reception, the whole mental world has 'gone hollow'. We simply do not 'communicate' by transferring the content of one consciousness into another, and in this respect, there is simply no such thing as 'knowledge-transfer'. Rather, communication is always a much more communally produced activity: there is interference, as it were, between and among all the signals that are being put into play, and there is no such thing as a kind of 'module' that 'contains' the knowledge that we can either teach or learn.

Nonetheless, much of what passes for 'learning' in our times proceeds precisely as if this were how knowledge operates. Our talk of 'outcomes' and of 'knowledge-transfer' presupposes a certainty and a stability in the process of learning or of 'taking' certain modules; and in doing so, it stops learning from being a process, reducing it to the level instead of the commercial activity of the consumption of a product, and of a product that is assumed to be non-organic, non-changing. Is it any surprise that a teaching that goes on in this model is rightly experienced as 'dead', in every sense?

Notwithstanding that dominant ideology, we intuitively are aware that the monumental model is not really a satisfactory model of how knowledge actually works; and it is most certainly not how learning works. I suspect that we have known this since at least 1845, for that is when Dickens satirized it when he described this particular mode of teaching as 'murdering the innocents' in his novel *Hard Times*, published that year. It is there that we meet that particular kind of teacher, Thomas

Gradgrind. Gradgrind is, literally, very matter-of-fact and 'realistic'. He believes that education is about the transmission of facts, which he confounds with knowledge. His reverence for the fact is rivalled only by that of his extremist rationalist predecessors in the Enlightenment, or by his progeny in today's conservative politicians (not simply those of the conservative parties in our democracies, of course).² For Gradgrind, the correlative of the fact is the mathematical calculation; but what this amounts to is an obsession with measurement. He is 'a man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over'. He is to be found always 'with a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.'³ The obsession with measurement comes at a price: the price that his pupils pay is the threat to their potential for grace and sociability, the contribution that we can make to social life, or simply the principle of 'giving' of oneself to a wider public realm that is social existence of any real kind.

Gradgrind is the kind of teacher who 'transmits knowledge'; but he does so in the mistaken belief that his pupils are empty vessels, and thus unworthy of any respect – at least until he has filled them with the image of himself. His purpose is to make his pupils, in turn, into the next generation of transmitters of his own ideas or 'facts'; and this to ensure that they conform to the system of society that he himself upholds. It is also designed to ensure that there can be no change to the social order, and that the historical existence of his 'innocents' will remain devoid of material substance. The innocents are to be denied the autonomy to bring about change, to effect things, or to live a life that could genuinely be called their own. This is why all such teaching is conservative. In this, of course, the experience of the pupils or students amounts to nothing: it simply does not count, should not be measured, cannot be computed.

Facts are, of course, important in teaching; but, if teaching and learning are to be historical, if they are to be allowed to make a difference to people's lives in such a way as to give those pupils the autonomy necessary for the assertion of their own authorities, then facts become subservient to experience. It used to be 'a fact', for example, that the world was flat; but the experience of circumnavigating the globe changes this 'fact', and the experience produces new facts that are themselves, in turn, subject to further modification. If learning is anything, it is a process of *transformation* and most certainly not of *transmission* or transfer. It is a process in which I can become something, and in which I can become something other than I am at present. Learning puts me in possession of new facts; and it does this not simply by a process of

abstract rationalization, but primarily through historical experience. Conservative education, such as the Gradgrindian instrumental utilitarianism that we see above, is frightened of the possibility that learning things might bring us the experience of freedom, and especially of a freedom that will allow us to grow intellectually. It thus does all in its power to proscribe the possibility of learning and teaching becoming a genuine student experience.

We need to examine this ‘experience’ more closely.

2

In 1933, Walter Benjamin published a short essay in *Die Welt im Wort*, called ‘Experience and Poverty’. He begins by lamenting the fact that a tradition of passing on experience in narratives or proverbial speech seems to be lost: ‘Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring?’ he asks. He relates the devaluation of experience at that moment to the war of 1914–18, in which a generation had to experience ‘some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world’. When the soldiers returned, they returned in a silence, ‘poorer in communicable experience’, as he puts it. His argument is not just about how terrible sufferings that these men underwent in war have rendered them unable to pass traditions on. Rather, it is more far-reaching: he wants to argue that experience itself is devalued and even ‘contradicted’, as he puts it, by modern technologies and by certain powers of abstraction that prefer to remain at the level of the theoretical or the drawing-board.⁴

As we might now say: experience of real-life is devalued in preference to the schemes, drawn up in the classroom, that are supposed to capture the reality of that external world. Among the effects of this, Benjamin lists two that are very important, saying that our economic experience is devalued by inflation and that our moral experience is devalued by the ruling powers. In this, what he is getting at is a cultural impoverishing of the facts of experience: these facts of experience are now seen to be less important than the ways we talk about them; and the ways we talk about them are in turn the key to our control and manipulation of them. That is to say, if ‘the ruling powers’ are defined as those who decide what is legitimate or normative with respect to values in society; and if, further, these powers understand those values in abstract terms, by the force of theorem rather than of material reality; it follows that the material realities of historical experience count for nothing, no

matter how substantial or even traumatic they may be. What, then, might we say when we turn to the ostensibly lesser 'trauma' occasioned by learning and teaching: the fundamental transformations of fact, of reality and of the identity of the self that should be effected by learning and teaching?

Prior to Benjamin's 1933 essay (in which, in passing, he refers also to 'the coming war', the Second World War), John Dewey had also written of this kind of experience. In 1916, just as the United States was about to enter the First World War, he published his *Democracy and Education*. In that book, Dewey outlined two different aspects to experience. He pointed out that there are two senses, an active sense and a passive sense, that get mixed together in the word 'experience': experience means trying something (as in an experiment whose outcome we cannot predict); but it also means undergoing something (and thus opening ourselves to the possibility of being transformed). As he put it, 'When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return ... The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of the experience ... We learn something'. Learning is precisely the negotiation of an experiment: we may have an idea of what we would like to achieve, but we cannot guarantee the outcome; and we will also potentially be surprised and even changed as we work our way through the experimental process. In this, Dewey is starting to outline a pragmatic view of education: an education that is formed in and through activity and practice – material historical thinking.

He goes on to address explicitly the relation of learning to experience, and he does this in a way that links learning to experience intrinsically. He writes that 'to "learn from experience" is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence'. This is important in that it puts learning into a historical situation; and it places the subject who learns – the student – right at the centre of an experience. In this, the student finds that they have to negotiate material realities, and that they have to realize that there can be material consequences of thinking in certain ways. Further, he goes on to note that 'under such conditions, doing becomes a trying: an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction – discovery of the connection of things'. Learning here is tied firmly to teaching, to an instruction in realizing that our very 'situatedness' in relation to the activity of learning has consequences. There is a materiality to learning and teaching: they literally *matter*. 'Intelligence' is a material entity. It has a historical

substance in and of itself. It is not a preparation for action, but is rather itself already constitutive of action. It does things, and changes not only minds but also other things as well.⁵

Dewey here explicitly addresses the ways we learn, and succeeds in his attempt to counter that state of affairs in which a pupil was regarded simply as a passive recipient of knowledge (a knowledge supposedly 'transmitted' or transferred spiritually, as it were). He replaces that moribund and non-organic model of learning with a radically healthier view of the pupil as active – physically and bodily present to the activity of learning and teaching. The account of learning that he rejects is one based upon a profound philosophical dualism, in which mind and body are radically discrete. For Dewey, that was no mere or bland philosophical position: it had a profoundly ethical counterpart, for he saw the dualism of mind and body in these matters as incipiently evil, in fact.

The reasoning is clear: the acceptance of such a dualism led straight to a situation where the body (and with it the entire realm of an exterior or public sphere) is regarded as 'mere' physicality, and meaning becomes instead the province of a realm of spirit divorced from material and historical realities. As he writes, in this condition, 'bodily activity becomes an intruder ... it becomes a distraction, an evil to be contended with'. For those who subscribe to the evils of dualism, a major problem lies in the fact that pupils (and even teachers) have bodies. Their bodies are, self-evidently for Dewey, 'wellsprings of energy' and, as such a coiled or potential energy, the body is prone to do things, to act. It is now therefore regarded as the source of a certain potential indiscipline, a threat to the control of the teacher in the classroom; and teaching, in this situation, becomes – in some cases primarily – a policing of the body's physicality.⁶

This is reminiscent of an early modern version of the world, such as we find in Milton's *Comus*, for example. In that text, the explicitly religious aspect of the question comes to the fore. The Lady at the centre of this seventeenth-century masque, threatened with rape, tells Comus, her violator, that the freedom of her mind will remain intact, despite whatever happens to her body: 'Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind / With all thy charms, although this corporal rind / Thou hast immanacled, while Heaven sees good'. In this, we see an extreme example of a divorcing of mind from body and a profound identification of the self's identity with the mind; but it comes at the cost of the body itself. The religious aspect of this is that it prioritizes spirit with the extreme consequence of the total eradication of the bodily or historically material world.

Such an attitude is also at the root of education conceived fundamentally in theological terms as a necessary policing of the

body. In this the 'good' pupil is 'educated not into responsibility for the significant and graceful use of bodily powers, but into an enforced duty not to give them free play'.⁷ As we know, certain fundamentalist groups try to effect a ban on the possibility of girls or women learning things: infamously, and disgracefully, the contemporary fundamentalist Taliban have historically targeted girls, and those who teach them, with violence. This actually comes close to the nub of the matter: at the core here is a fear of the body – specifically, in this instance, of the female body – and a madness that says it must be controlled. However, before the more 'advanced' societies congratulate themselves on not being as regressive as the Taliban in these matters, we might profitably consider the more subtle ways in which we have negated the body – including the body as the site of a sexual difference – in our own cultures. This goes all the way from those historical men-only canons of literature and the arts through to ideologies of single-sex schooling. In many of the advanced societies, the governing myth here is not that which shapes the barbarism of the Taliban; but it is to be found in the equally fundamentalist reading of the Adam and Eve myth, where a profound awareness of the body and a shame regarding it is the consequence of eating of the fruits of knowledge.

And yet, the body is at the foundation of all empirical perception, as of all aesthetics: it is through the body that we perceive the world in terms of our material engagements with it, in terms of our experiencing of it. If education, learning and teaching are to be experiences with a real and substantive historical material reality, then the body itself must be engaged. Imagine, for a simple example, the case of a musical education. Music usually involves notation on the page; but the real point of music is the experiencing and the sensation of physical vibration. We hear music thanks to the manipulation of air, the transmission of vibrations that are felt not just within the ear but also deep within the body itself. The response can be various: we dance, we sing, we clap hands, we weep; but all these are material and physical – aesthetically visceral – sensations or experiences.

If we isolate the mind from such bodily experience, Dewey argued, then it follows that we start to prioritize the objects of perception as things also in isolation: we see things and not the relations between things. If we cannot allow for a learning that depends upon the essential relation of our body with material activity, then we cannot hope to see the relations between things in the world. We become removed from the sphere of the social and of community; and the social becomes rapidly atomized. We end up lacking the possibility of sympathy, for we are reduced to living in the mental space of a now vacuous 'I', an 'I'

crying out to be filled. Worse, we are an 'I' crying out to be intellectually manipulated into conformity with what already exists. 'Do I dare disturb the universe?' asked J. Alfred Prufrock in T.S. Eliot's poem. In these cases, the answer is clearly negative. But real learning is indeed a shaking of the universe, a disturbing of the ground beneath our feet. More than this, it is a shaking of the ground on which *both* the learner and the teacher stand: it is a communal experience, and an experience of community. We usually simply call that something like 'communication'; and communication is central to education.

But the ground beneath the feet of Gradgrind's children is shaken in an entirely different way. Gradgrind's classes sit in rows, segregated by gender, and their links to their daily life are severed while in the classrooms of his school. Sissy Jupe is even renamed as 'Cecilia'; her father's fondness for her, as reflected in her pet-name, reduced to the pure formality of identification by Gradgrind (who prefers to see her as 'Girl number twenty'). Sissy, though brought up in daily experience of horses, cannot offer a satisfactory verbal definition of what might be a horse. That definition is given by Bitzer instead, and it is given as an abstract and entirely atomized set of discrete qualities: 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.'⁸ And now, announces Gradgrind, Sissy knows what is a horse.

Sissy is told she must not paper her walls or floors with images of flowers, for that would be to indulge her fancy; and fancy or imagination is what is to be removed. In the eradication of imagination, however, we are left simply with atomized parts of a whole that no one can see or experience anymore. If we continue briefly with the example of music, we do not fully perceive music when we reduce it to the sum of its constituent notes and parts. A major chord involves notes in concert; and, in concert, the tones interfere with each other so that the sound made by the chord cannot simply be expressed as the summation of its three elements of root, third and fifth. As Dewey puts it in relation to a different example, 'A wagon is not perceived when all its parts are summed up; it is the characteristic connection of the parts which makes it a wagon.'⁹

There is a difference, then, between what we can call the mechanization of experience, which is achieved by the reduction of relations to discrete and atomized things; and, on the other hand, experience as learning, which is much less predictable and which involves the body in sensation. Within 'the student experience' it is the former that becomes

the quarry, for it is the former that can be ostensibly ‘measured’ and quantified. It would be like trying to learn how to play the piano simply by reading musical notation, and without ever going through the physical changes required in feeling how to strike the keys, heavily or lightly (*forte* or *piano*); or how to stretch and coordinate the fingers; or how to sit or stand. What of those whose bodily sensations are limited or disturbed by some quality or other? What of Beethoven, say? The great percussionist, Evelyn Glennie, who is deaf, can feel and sense her music through the vibrations of the instruments around her: music is experienced neither just as notation nor as a discrete activity of the ear, but is instead an entire physical experience. That experience is itself at the root of Beethoven’s own ‘imagining’ of his own music: the emancipation of the imagination itself has a profound and fundamental relation to experience. And if it is thus for a composer or performer as they learn the music that they will ‘teach’ us, then it is equally thus for the audience or the learner.

Any craftsperson knows this. Richard Sennett has recently written about the importance of understanding the hand itself in relation to learning. He, too, gives an example from music. As a cellist, he indicates that one learns to play the cello not by an abstract transferring of notation to sound, but actually through feeling how the hand itself makes the notes. Practice is just the name we give to that state of affairs in which our body starts to work as if intuitively in relation to the materiality of the objects (in this case, cello, bow) that it manipulates: the body learns to act in concert with something exterior to it, to make the third thing that we call ‘music’. These musical examples are paradigmatic of all learning: ignore the role of the body, and both learning and teaching are radically limited and circumscribed.

Dewey relates his own idea of what constitutes thinking here explicitly to what is going on in the First World War: ‘As this is written, the world is filled with the clang of contending armies.’ In our response to this dread and factual state of affairs, it is not enough to register individual items (to take an atomized view), nor is it enough to ignore them (or to argue that this has no effect on our other activities, especially those that involve thinking and learning). He writes that, ‘To fill our heads, like a scrapbook, with this and that item as a finished and done-for thing, is not to think. It is to turn ourselves into a piece of registering apparatus.’

First here, we should note the necessary attention to the specifics of detail – we do indeed have to try to perceive things; but we should note also that Dewey is saying that, though necessary for thinking, this is not yet a sufficient condition for thinking to take place, for the *transformative event* that is a thought to happen. It is not enough to

parade across our world, registering blandly the events that surround us, as if we were some kind of neutral camera. When Isherwood described his writing as being characterized by the formulation 'I am a camera', even he knew that the camera is positioned, that its holder is repelled by certain things and wants to turn from them, while being seduced by the possibilities of other things. To present oneself as a mere 'registering apparatus' is not yet experience, and thus also not thinking, especially if we consider thinking to be something that has a material and historical substance: that is, if we consider thinking to be an action, every bit as real and historical as a bodily action. Instead, Dewey writes, 'To consider the *bearing* of the occurrence on what may be, but is not yet, is to think.'¹⁰

Thinking is related not simply to registering what happens, but actually to imagining what might be the case, that is, to imagination as such. However, this is not some dreamy-eyed imagining, done in the seductive charm and cool of one's room late at night; rather, it is imagination as action, imagination in the midst of battle. Edward Said always took the view that critical thinking – the only serious kind of thinking that there is – is tied up with the demand for liberation. As he put it, describing his own preferred modes of literary criticism, 'criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom'. This, together with his political writings, give a real substance to his view that 'even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, values, *even lives* to be fought for'.¹¹

Where does this get us to? Both Dewey and, before him, Dickens are in essential agreement with these formulations of Edward Said. The question of learning and teaching is really a matter of a battle, even a physical battle, a battle for the future control of our own bodies and thereby for the future ways in which we will occupy and relate to each other and to our environment or ecology. Ask Sissy Jupe.

3

And what now of our much-vaunted and debated 'student experience' crowded over by University marketing managers, surveyed endlessly by student associations whose surveys – perhaps ominously, and presumably

not entirely disinterestedly – are sometimes financed by banks? Has it anything whatsoever to do with this? If it has not, then it is missing the point. And, of course, in the hands of those who describe and manipulate ‘the student experience’, it really does have nothing whatsoever to do with this. ‘The student experience’ is there, we might say, in order to ensure that our students *do not have any experience*. It is a myth designed to preclude the experiences of learning and teaching. Teaching and learning take place, certainly; but they do so *despite* the demands and norms of ‘the student experience’; for it is really but an exercise in consumerist branding. As such, it is a sinister threat to the fundamental point and function of the University.

Real and genuine experience, we might say by contrast, is precisely contentiousness, the kinds of battle for and with the imagination – and for the possibilities of freedom in actual lives and futures – described by Dewey and Said; but it is a physical battle every bit as much as a mental or spiritual one. Dewey thought of it as an engaged thinking. He pointed out that, in a situation such as war, whether we are directly involved or not, we take sides, at least ‘emotionally and imaginatively’, for ‘We desire this or that outcome’; and if we do not have such desires, then we are not thinking: ‘One wholly indifferent to the outcome does not follow or think about what is happening at all.’

Importantly, this shows the consequentiality of thought. As Dewey put it, ‘Born in partiality, in order to accomplish its tasks it [thought] must achieve a certain detached impartiality’; and this is so because we share in the consequences of the action, of the experience. It follows from these observations that thinking, thus, happens always in a state of doubt, of uncertainty as to outcomes: ‘all thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world is sure of what he is still looking for’. It thus follows that ‘all thinking involves a risk’.¹²

‘Risk’ is precisely what ‘the student experience’ cannot accommodate. The very language of its documentation is dominated by ‘guarantees’ and assertions of what the University *will* ‘provide’ or ‘deliver’ by way of this commodity. But genuine experience is, as we can now see clearly, something that is oriented towards the future, towards the ongoing emancipation of human possibilities or potential. Insofar as it is future-oriented in this way, it is by definition *unpredictable*. As Dewey and Said make clear, such unpredictability is not ill-judged recklessness: at each and every moment, one can be ‘unmistakably’ on one side or other of a division or decision. However, if the experience in question is such that it will lead to the assertion of autonomous and free authority, to the ability to make the world anew in the

light of one's learning, then it cannot know exactly where it will end up. Further, any such orientation to the future is also always an orientation directing the self towards others, towards the community with whom we enter into relations as a condition of the possibility of learning and teaching. It is thus not simply in my sole gift to make the future this or that: it depends on my level of association with others, and theirs with me, and ours with the environment that we both find and make, that we receive (undergo, in Dewey's words) and imagine or realize.

It is important that we note here that learning is about the release of potential. However, this is not the kind of potential that is exhausted once it is exercised as a kinetic activity. The Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, can help us understand this. Following Aristotle, Agamben points out that there are at least two kinds of potential. The first is that which can be exhausted through a form of realization. For example, certain liquids have the potential to expand and, when they do so, they usually lose their form as liquid and become a gas. In this, the liquid 'exhausts' its being as liquid, and replaces it with a new identity, that of a gas. However, against this, consider a different type of potential. The architect, let us say, is an architect because she has the potential to design and build a building. When she does this, she does not exhaust the potential that she had: indeed, she may even increase that potential. Furthermore, that potential is there even if she never builds again. This kind of potential does not need to be used up in order to prove its existence. It can be an ever-renewing and, indeed, ever-growing potential.

The modes of learning and of teaching that are based in genuine experience are related firmly to this second type of potential. They shape the possibility of ever-increasing liberation and of an ever-expanding association or relatedness that we can call society or the environment. 'The student experience', by contrast, focuses on the first kind of potential here: in this, one has the potential to fulfil the requirements of a module, and one exhausts that when the module's course has run. The logic is one of 'student progression': in other words, 'That was that; and now onwards to the next one.' Such a logic has everything to do with consumption and nothing whatsoever to do with education.

In sum, 'the student experience', in foreclosing the possibilities of genuine learning and teaching, precludes the possibility of genuine – critical – thought. For Dewey, such thinking involves us in a) an initial perplexity, due to the fact that we are in an organic and evolving situation called history; b) a tentative interpretation of where we stand in relation to this evolving situation, and especially in terms of how we interpret

relations and consequences of possible future actions; c) examination of data; d) a trying out of things to see if we can bring our initial perplexity into a calmer condition, thus allowing us our next thought; and e) a commitment to this thought, if it seems to work for us by opening up a possible imagined future.

This is open-ended, risk-driven, physical, critical; and, above all, it is *transformative*.

Transformation – of the self, of the social, cultural and political sphere, of the natural world and our modes of inhabiting it – is at the heart of any serious University education. The University is where we can open ourselves and our students (indeed, ourselves *as* students) to the discovery of things previously undreamt of in our philosophies; and, having discovered them, no longer merely interpret the world differently but actually do something substantive to change things. Changing the world is what we usually call politics; but changing the self is what we call *experience*. Through an education, we go where angels fear to tread, into a contest with the bounds of knowing.

Just over a century ago, E.M. Forster opened his first major novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, with a paean to such experience. Philip tells Lilia, on the eve of her departure for Italy, that if she wants the real thing, she must go off the beaten track. The injunction is common enough for us: we eschew the plasticity of tourism – the faked-up ‘Italy experience’ – for the authenticity of the hidden, the unknown – Italians living whatever lives they are living, lives that are for themselves and not acted out for the benefit of the short-stay tourist. It is thus that we validate our experience at all: the experience, as such, requires a confrontation with the unknown and a negotiation of it. It means an acknowledgement that, while there are rules and *forms* there that govern what we can do, those rules are there to be questioned, even broken, if they bar our way to the real *content* of a positive engagement. While regulations may *govern* experience, they should never *become* the totality of the experience.

Confronting the unknown is some major part of what it is to be a student, to experience living as a student. However, today, there seems to be a terror of acknowledging this. Who, among us, feels encouraged to be easy in saying to a student’s question, ‘I don’t know’? In the marketized consumerist model of education, the relation of the student to knowledge is cheapened to the point of utter falsification: there exists a body of knowledge; the student pays to get it; and I, as teacher, reach back into the store and provide it. Such a transaction is anathema to the very idea of experience itself: it denies experience while promising to provide it.

Yet, this managerialist fabrication lies behind all models of thinking that want us to dignify the myth that we call ‘the student experience’. It is rather like giving the student the brochure, replete with images of terracotta pots and frescoed walls, as a substitute for talking and living Italian. The alleged concern for ‘the student experience’ is actually a concern to *manage* and *administer* students, as part of the consumerist process. Theodor Adorno knew what was at stake in this. In flight himself from Nazi persecution, he argued in 1944 that what happens is that enlightenment (which should include a struggle for knowing things) is converted into positivism (where certain facts are assumed as self-evident truth). Then, the world can be presented as the unchanging realm of those facts, and knowledge becomes reduced to the managed ‘worship of facts’. We end up in a situation where, as he put it, ‘Not Italy is offered, but evidence that it exists.’¹³ By analogy, today, we do not offer a proper experience of being a student, but instead an image of what might be such an existence and experience. And then we sell it: education as kitsch.

This, at least, is what the architects of the mythic ‘student experience’ want. However, there is still a place for experience in University education; and it is an entirely legitimate pedagogical task to seek out its possibilities. Building on Dewey above, we can say that there are two senses of experience: first, there is the *undergoing* of a transformative event; and, in this, the experience partly consists in our not being in control of the situation. Pedagogically, it is the negotiation of uncertainty; and the word we used to have for that is ‘learning’. Secondly, there is the *amassing* of such negotiations; and, once we have amassed these, we talk of our authority, an authority that derives from actual experiences undergone: and we used to call this ‘teaching’. Experience in the University is the interweaving of these two senses.

And surely these are at the core of anything that we call a University experience? That, surely, is the establishing of a situation where the coming generation can find their authority from an engagement with the constant transformation – of self and of world – that we call reality, the place where angels fear to tread, but where we ourselves must.

4

It is well known that young children learn a great deal through play. It is perhaps not so often accepted that things are no different at any later stage in life. Play is central to learning and to teaching; for, in play, we

exercise imagination and we explore possibility; we take the 'what is' and ask 'what if' instead. Play allows us not only to imagine the world and ourselves as other than we are, but actually to become other than we are. That, of course, is why it can be subversive; and that is why governments and administrations are suspicious of it. In its threat to control and regulation, it must be downgraded: it becomes 'frivolous' or 'unproductive' or 'a waste of time'. In hard times (and times are always Dickensian-hard, of course, when a powerful class wants to restrain possibilities that others might become free), play becomes construed and mediated as a threat to efficiency.

Yet, as even the mythmakers of 'the student experience' know, play is serious business. The 'student experience' is thus characterized not just in terms of teaching and learning; rather, it reaches out to embrace all with which a student might want to engage, including facilities of all sorts. Many of these facilities are what we might call 'hardcore': they include accommodation (for both living and teaching), libraries, refectories, shops on or near campus and so on. There are also other facilities, including entertainment venues, as given by the Students' Union and by all kinds of society; and, in these latter areas, we find 'the student experience' at play. The point, however, is that this is also 'contained' play: it, too, is regulated in ways that are designed to eliminate risk.

We can return to our quadruped graminivorous creature here. When Lev Vygotsky considered the development of the child, he looked at a young boy who was playing with a stick. The stick, in the hands of this boy, rapidly became something other than it was; and the young boy started to 'ride' it as if it were a horse. As a horse, the stick is now in a different physical relation to the body of the boy; and, through it, he can imagine his environment as other than it is. He can become a horse-rider, even though there is no horse there; but he is showing that he has the potential to do something new, and to transform his body and his world thereby. The stick is what Vygotsky calls a 'pivot'; and, around such a pivot, the boy not only learns, but also develops. This is what we might call *Bildung* or *formation*. It involves a transformation of boy and world; but a transformation that is effected through unregulated play.

Friedrich Schiller, in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, was also extremely aware of the power of play, or of *Spielen*. In Schiller, the play in question was both the childhood activity that would be later described by Vygotsky; but it was also theatre, play-acting. *Spielen* brings body and mind together in the form of action once more. Theatre, Schiller argues, is a prime location for the activity of learning and teaching as

I have been describing it in these pages. The important thing about this kind of play, however, is that, by trying out a role, one can achieve not only knowledge but also *authority*.

Authority is, as it were, the other side of experience. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that we unquestionably grant authority to those more experienced than ourselves. In fact, in our time, this is extremely unlikely to happen: experience counts for little, if anything, in the question of authority. In our time, rather than listen to the voice of experience whose loss Benjamin lamented, we are encouraged and enjoined to prefer the mathematical voice of abstract facts and computation.

An anecdote will suffice to explain this. In a certain faculty of Arts, whose plant was built some time ago and suited for very different conditions from those of mass tertiary education, some lecturers complained that office space was too small to accommodate seminars of eight students. The cramped environment made it difficult to concentrate on the intellectual work in the seminar; the door, left open of necessity, meant that disruptive noise could be heard. The University's authorities were invited to discuss this, with a view to improving conditions. Those authorities could not do anything unless and until they had actually measured the space of each office, computed that against the space that the University 'allocated' for each individual student body, and then saw whether there was any mismatch between these sums. Invited to come along and actually witness the open doors, the stuffed rooms, they expressed no interest, as 'that would prove nothing'. This is, as it were, the eventual triumph of Cartesian rationalism: abstraction is closer to truth than empirical reality; and, certainly, abstraction is what we turn to if we seek authority. Experience itself has no such legitimizing power: it is, after all, 'merely' anecdote, merely subjective and thus lacking in an authority that is now identified with pure abstraction, with the cold and untouchable 'reality' of number. Authority in our time is given and characterized precisely by the eschewing of any substantive experience, and the alleged 'objectivity' of this abstraction is what also turns human subjects into objects at the mercy of those in control of the computations or accounts: our very own Gradgrinds.

At some level, surely, the very point of learning is to gain authority; and to gain that authority through the transformations that constitute learning. More than this, the point is to get the authority to seek the release of further potential, for other learners in their turn. Genuine authority, in this way, is rather like a democracy in that it is ever-extending and ever-expanding. That is to say, what we pass on or transfer or transmit is *not* the module or modularized and compartmentalized

nuggets of commercially graded knowledge; rather, it is an *activity of imagining* that we pass on, the activity of critical consciousness in action and in history itself. In short, we pass on the possibility of *play*, of trying things out, trying out roles in an experimental fashion. We pass on – and also generate – *potential*; and play is central to the imagining of that potential, as also to our capacities for realizing it in communally engaged or social actions.

Play, therefore – unregulated play, or, better, play that makes its own rules autonomously as it goes along – should be at the centre of a University. By this, I do not mean to suggest that the University is a site for frivolity, obviously: I have already rejected the description of play as frivolity as a conservative ploy that is designed to hamstring people and to force them into specific forms of ‘efficient productivity’, where ‘child number twenty’ can be as productive as the next child. Play as *Spielen*, however, is axiomatic to learning and teaching; and this is especially so if we consider the importance of experiment to teaching and to learning. Not only Schiller and Vygotsky, but also Johan Huizinga would back this up, for the social is shaped to a large extent by the rituals that surround the modes of living produced by what he described as *homo ludens* (playing man). Play is that which disrupts the routines of mindless production, the mechanization of life, in order to produce *time*; and that time is where thinking – and thus also learning – can take place, as our bodies try out new roles, new languages, new stances or positions, new arguments, new battles, new loves.

However, something has happened in the developed and wealthy societies in the last few decades. Whereas, in the mid-century, children might range and roam freely, playing in the relatively traffic-free streets, picking up sticks and becoming cowboys or mountaineers, or doctors and nurses, now it is conventionally the case that such play is regarded as too dangerous, too risky. This, of course, is not specific to thinkers of the conservative right, with their basic demand for the policing of people; it is also shared by those on the left who have become dismissive of certain types of role-play, often confusing the play (playing with toy guns, say) with a political reality (being a violent gangster). In place of this unregulated and unsupervised play, play now has become much more structured and organized. Further than this, it has become essentially privatized, and not something that opens up the public sphere for our children to inhabit and shape.

Children do not play in the street any longer; they go instead to play-group. And, as play has become structured and organized in this way, so it has become something that has to be provided. At this stage, the demand for play in turn generates groups of ‘providers’; and play,

with great rapidity, becomes something that is easily and very rapidly commercialized into a business. Children now pay to play, as it were. It has its own modes and measures of 'efficiency', and is valued in terms of its 'productivity' and so on. Further, once it has become such a commercial transaction, play is subject to exactly the same kinds of 'quality assurance' mechanisms that have evacuated teaching and learning of content. We do not get play anymore; rather, we get the processes and procedures of play. These, at least, can be quantified and measured.

This is the fundamental ideology that has been carried forward into the marketization of life in the playful aspects of 'the student experience'. In short, the discourse of this student experience is there in order to preclude the possibility that students, like children, will construct in imagination a new configuration of the public sphere through play. It is a restraint on play, so to speak; and it is thus also a restraint on learning and on teaching. As such, it arrests the development from play into learning; it arrests the transformation of experience into authority. The net result of this, ostensibly paradoxically, is a state of permanent infantilization of culture. That is paradoxical because play, as we have seen, is itself determining of *Bildung*: it helps growth and edification.

All of this may help to explain why it is the case that, once they have graduated, students find it difficult to exercise their authority in the workplace. Corporate business – the graduate's employer – has nothing to learn from our graduates; on the contrary, the graduates have everything to learn from the business in question. Is it any surprise that business routinely complains that Universities do not provide the specific qualities that business requires? The one thing that business does not require is the authority of its workforce to change things: conformity and regulation – efficiency – is again the dominant code.

We can consider the emergence of 'the student experience' as a specific new element in the management of higher education. Broadly, it goes hand in hand with the introduction of elements of a supposed 'free' market in higher education. In other words, 'the student experience' can be fairly precisely dated, like sex for Philip Larkin. Where sex began for Larkin in 1963, 'the student experience' started, as it were, in 1998, between the abolition of the binary divide (between Polytechnic institutions and Universities which happened in 1992) and the Blair-inspired political target of having 50 per cent of school-leavers benefiting from a University degree.

Obviously all of this is not to suggest that students had no experiences prior to 1998; but they did not have 'the student experience'. The new 'student experience' is related directly to questions of the market and to

the transfer of cash. The issue of fees is addressed later in this book; but suffice here to say that the introduction of fees to the higher education sphere in 1998, and its first tripling in 2003, did not signify that students were now paying for their education whereas they had received it 'free' before. In fact, before 1998, students typically did indeed pay for their education; but they paid for it through a system of progressive direct taxation, on the assumption that, if their education got them a job, it then required taxed payment into a general pot for others to use in the future and for future further extension of freedoms. Payment is thus subject to their potential for payment, and varying upwards according to the benefits they received in their salaries.

But the story of 'the student experience' begins not in the cloisters of Oxbridge, nor on the leafy campus of Sussex or Keele. It begins, in fact, in the period of a certain kind of scarcity of resources in the lead up, during and after the Second World War; and it can be said properly to begin in a relatively small seaside resort town on the east coast of England: Skegness. Skegness is where Billy Butlin opened his first holiday camp, with a novel kind of business model. The idea – which really developed fully in the after-war years, inspiring Pontins as well – was one where you paid an initial global sum as an entry-price to the attractions, and then got access to an entire raft, or a 'suite' as it is now called in business jargon, of facilities. The model was one where, by paying a fee upfront, you were entitled to what would ostensibly look like 'free' access to all the facilities. The basic facilities were all included in the entry-fee, and so too were many playground-style attractions such as funfairs. Soon, of course, there were some notable exceptions to this; and participants or customers had the possibility of paying extras for some facilities that were considered special.

For the child visitor, typically unaware of the high cost of entry, everything was 'free'. The experience was one of untrammelled consumption; and, in what has been characterized as the post-war 'age of austerity', such consumption would have appeared as, and have been felt as, a return to real living, as opposed to mere surviving. The child ran from amusement to amusement, from helter-skelter to swimming-pool by way of the roller-coaster and merry-go-round. All around, there were the staff, dressed in uniform as 'Redcoats' and these staff not only acted as hosts but also as tour guides, showing how to use the facilities, and as entertainment. When one tired of the amusements, one could turn to the staff, who perhaps would be in the midst of putting on an evening show of songs and dance; when one tired of the surfeit of facilities, one could go and watch them acting out their comedy routines, into which they would sometimes invite the

audience for a widened form of participation. The audience could then do 'presentations' of themselves.

What has this to do with 'the student experience'? Everything, in fact. The growth and development of Universities, after the first major expansion in the 1960s, led to an emergent *national* University system, rather like Butlin's in that respect. While the emergent Universities were all different – located in towns or in campus – nonetheless there was a drive to some sense that all students were enjoying similar kinds of life; and, as in the proto-'theme-park' experience of Butlin's, there was the implicit demand for consistency across the patch. No matter where in the nation you took your studies, there had to be comparability if we were to be able to claim this as a national system and not merely a series of local institutions with their own regionalized priorities. As with the holiday camps, there would be obvious minor local differences (the Stirling campus is famously beautiful; others are more utilitarian), but there would be some sense of comparability in terms of the 'experience' (you would want your holiday this year in Rhyl to be as good as last year's in Bournemouth, say).

The students in the now expanded national University system would be away from home, for the most part; they were gaining some independence; they were finding themselves as a pressure group and as a community of interest. The teenager generation of the 1950s were now the student generation. They took an interest in music and so on, and the media of the period again ensured that there would be shared priorities in this domain. In short, there was something close to an idea of a unified national system of education at the higher or tertiary level; and, however quickly it was to be threatened during the 1960s, also the emergence of a sense of a national culture and identity. As the Universities developed, especially given the fact that students were away from home, it was important to ensure that they had things to do outside their class-time. Hence the development of student clubs and the like as a vital aspect of *student life*, as it used to be called.

This was an experimental period. It was also a time when students would start to assert a certain kind of group identity, often associated with a cultural avant-garde. This led to the break-up of an easily maintained national consensus regarding values. Thus, for a cultural example, instead of everyone favouring the Beatles in music, new types of interest started to gain their own followings: progressive rock; hard rock; singer-songwriter melancholy; crossover jazz-funk; and so on. It was a time when students would be trying themselves out, forging new identities, experimenting in all senses with the post-Larkin world, so to speak. It was, as is well documented, a period of some radical

experimentation. It might even be called a period of playful experience. It led inexorably to 1968.

After 1968, the question of control of this experience soon becomes necessary. Experience has to be managed, lest it might actually change things. Throughout the following decades, a new student identity begins to take shape. Students are seen as potentially revolutionaries, radicals, free-thinkers. The Open University makes this worse and more widespread: now everyone and anyone can be such a student, can adopt such an identity. The national centre cannot hold as easily as before; and terrible beauties start to be born – above all, the beauty that is freedom achieved through the play of an autonomous imagination. In the late 1970s, this system is brought down to size through a series of economic cuts imposed by the new Thatcher administration; and any resistance to those cuts and their effects is neutered by that explicit change in regimen from UGC to HEFCE, ensuring that the government has a fuller control of what the University institution will do.

This is the backdrop to a specific financial and economic ‘initiative’, brought into being by the Conservative administration, with John Patten as its then Secretary of State for Education. In 1992, the government proposes the abolition of the ‘binary divide’ between Polytechnics and Universities. This shift doubles, at a stroke, the number of Universities in the UK, for those specialist institutions that had been previously called Polytechnics were now renamed as Universities, and given the same type of research-and-teaching mission. Suddenly, funding is a new and critical issue in this state of play: it is difficult to increase funding uniformly now across the entire system. As a result, both research and teaching now have to be ‘costed’ and ‘priced’; and, to bring this about, teaching itself has to be compartmentalized more fully than ever before. Play has no role whatsoever in the resulting structure of efficiency demands.

The solution to this emerging predicament is the introduction of upfront fees; and, with it, the encouragement to subscribe to the view that higher education (HE) is part of a market economy. While education at HE level has always contributed to the economy, the trick now was to say that this external relation to business should be replicated internally. Everything now becomes part of a purchaser-provider contract; and everything interior to the University should be marketized. Key to this is the sense that, as with Butlin’s, when you pay your fee upfront, you want a good ‘experience’, and an experience that is to be homogenized as much as possible nationally. All must become ‘excellent’.

This is not to argue that the University is now a theme-park; but it is to suggest that the thinking that informs ‘the student experience’ as

opposed to student life is informed by the same kind of marketization as that of the holiday camp or theme-park business. The business model is exactly the same. Lecturers have become the moral equivalent – or, more precisely, the commercial equivalent – of Redcoats in this business model. The activities of learning and teaching become simply one among the now wide-ranging ‘suite’ of facilities that constitute a specific institution’s ‘offer’, as it is called.

Prior to the emergence of ‘the student experience’ as a major element in our marketing and branding of ourselves, it was always certainly the case that learning and teaching were at the centre of the University’s relation – what we would now call ‘contract’ – with the student; and, it followed from this that some of the other elements of the student life would be taken care of by students themselves. Universities certainly funded things like Students’ Unions and the like; but what went on in those unions was largely the responsibility of the students themselves. Accommodation was also a key element in making sure that students had the right environment for learning; and, perhaps above all, the sense of the University a site of play was important – with the equally important modification that this play is now characterized not as a serious activity that is integral to *Bildung* but rather as consumerist-style entertainment and pleasure-production. The University, while not a theme-park, is put in the position of struggling against becoming a mere extension of the ‘culture industry’.

5

This becomes clear if we regard seriously some of the University documentation on the student experience. All Universities now have websites showing what a great time students are having; and all have, in their prospectus, paragraphs and chapters on the quality of the student experience in their particular institutions. We can look closely at one very clear example of this, in *Policy Statement: Enhancing the Student Experience* by the 1994 Group, published in 2007.

The 1994 Group of UK Universities has taken this issue of the student experience perhaps most seriously and for good reason: they see themselves explicitly as the market leaders in the field. In all official surveys, their institutions come very close to the top of league tables. It may be worth noting, in passing, that the difference between positions in these tables (and this does not affect simply the student experience) is often extremely marginal. While University X comes above University Y,

it may be that the first has scored a satisfaction rate of 93.7 per cent, while the latter has scored 93.6. These differences, especially at the micro-level in relation to individual questions posed in these surveys, are so marginal as to be almost statistically insignificant; but their market effect is enormous, and the economic consequence is potentially devastating for some institutions, as also for the students attending and graduating from those institutions. If the difference between the top position in a table and an institution that lies thirtieth, say, is nothing greater than 2 or 3 per cent, then that potential difference, well within a margin of error or based upon a misreading of data, can cost the 'weaker' institution an enormous sum. In extreme cases, the abstract mathematization of quality that is supposedly revealed in these figures may cost not only institutional reputation but quite serious teachers their jobs.

The 1994 Group statement starts by acknowledging, rightly and exactly in line with my own argument here, that there is no such thing as 'the' student experience. There are so many different types of student, and so many different kinds of life going on, that it is folly to try to categorize and to homogenize. This said, that is exactly what the document will now set out to do.

The self-contradictory position here leads immediately to a certain incoherence or inconsistency. On one hand, the student experience is described in terms that show how well the University adapts to the rapidly changing expectations of the student body: it is thus, we can see, primarily about the satisfaction of prior expectation. However, it is also, and equally and simultaneously, precisely *not* about this. Rather, it is about preparing students for their future, and preparing them for their assigned task of making a significant contribution to society. The net result of this is the resolution of the bland phrase that the University will aim to 'provide the best possible experience'; but this, of course, begs the question immediately in all sorts of ways. How do we 'provide' experience? And how do we provide it if what it actually amounts to is determined by things that are not in our control – such as the expectations that specific students might have had, or, on the other hand, the equally fast-changing demands of future lives, as students carry out their assigned duties of making their contributions?

Interestingly, the *Policy Statement* document abandons the language of *Bildung* or *formation*, and it replaces it with the language of the student 'journey'. Such language is interesting. A journey has a defined end-point: the destination. If we set out on a journey, we do so with a destination in mind that has to be guaranteed; otherwise, we would not be on a journey, but something like a ramble (like Samuel Johnson, maybe) or

a meander (like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, perhaps). This journey, then, is entirely different from venturing out on the experimentation that used to be called 'learning', the route-making that we might once have called 'discovery' in which we learn how to 'make our own way' in and through the world. We have the logic of the satnav against the poetry of Wordsworth, so to speak.

The language of the 'journey', of course, is itself indebted to contemporary celebrity culture; and it is designed to replace the ideas of *transformation of the self* that are central to *Bildung* and to formation: to education as I have described it above. Where *Bildung* can be difficult, requiring self-assessment and self-conscious transformation, the 'journey' is a vague term in that celebrity culture. On one hand, it is meant to suggest that there is a very clear direction of travel – in most cases, from tragic disadvantage to sudden success. It is also usually intended as something fast: journeys now take much less time than they used to do. Importantly, however, and above all, the journey involves a change of place, but *not* a change of self.

This is key: as in Butlin's, the consuming self simply consumes, and that which is consumed makes no difference fundamentally to the self that entered the holiday camp or institution. The 'scandal' here is that, whereas the student experience is supposed to show how life chances can be transformed, in fact it is designed precisely to ensure that there is no social mobility at all, no real change of self or of attitude that will encourage or allow the student to change. It is little wonder that, as a result, there might be some levels of dissatisfaction in what goes on. The wonder is that it is not higher than it is.

The 1994 Group gives seven priorities for future work in the field of enriching 'the student experience' after its 2007 *Statement*. The first of these is the provision of transparent data about the student experience itself (which, within the document, is never actually properly defined, in fact, but left rather strategically vague), so that students can make 'informed choices'. The mantra of the market again rules here: it is as if the provision of data will in and of itself exculpate Universities from the responsibility of allowing risk; as if also the transparency of the data guaranteed some supposed truth or reality; and as if also the student-as-consumer is some kind of ideally rational purchaser, unaffected by anything outside the transaction. Further, the mantra of choice in this discourse occludes the fact that the choice is not all one-way: Universities still 'select' candidates, dependent usually on qualifications previously achieved by the candidates. It is not, and never has been, the case that students 'choose' in some kind of untrammelled fashion (there are many constraints, not all of them educational); nor is it ever the case that

choice is categorically fulfilled or satisfied. This is so even in the case of a fully marketized and privatized version of the University.

1994's second priority is the provision of a workforce; and in this, we see the University presenting itself in a position of subservience and servility. It and its graduates have no authority; instead, they become mere handmaidens to an undifferentiated realm of commerce or what is always vaguely alluded to as 'business', as if there were indeed something as specific as 'business-as-such'. It is argued that a good student experience – looking to the future of the student's life – will help ensure that students fit into the existing workforce. Again, there is to be no assumption of the possibility of fundamental or structural change carried out by the student who might have learnt something while at University: instead, the student is to be made fit to conform. This, as the punks used to say, constitutes a future that is no future at all; for it is the same as yesterday.

There then follows the third priority for promoting the student voice; and in this there is the valorization of 'consultation'. Ostensibly, then, this offers a glimmer of democratic participation. It explicitly thereby ensures that the University is not seen as coercive with respect to its students; and, of course, this would be a good thing. However, it also instils a sense that the University has no authority either. As with most kinds of managed consultation processes, the end-results are guaranteed by the questions. 'Would you like your morning post delivered by 3 p.m., or by 5 p.m.?' Thus it is that the managers of the postal service can claim that customers *wanted* their erstwhile morning delivery of post changed to 3 p.m.

In the consultations advocated by the 1994 Group, schools and colleges are to be included; so by the time of this fourth priority, the student experience has become pure marketing to potential future customers, in fact. The fifth priority is to do with resources, including the physical infrastructure: that is, accommodation and the like have to be up to a high standard. Sixth is a further element of marketing: the internationalization of the student experience. This does not mean the kind of compulsory foreign-language tuition that, in my first chapter, I placed at the centre of a democratic institution where we listen to voices that are difficult or foreign to what we usually expect, nor does it in fact mean anything so academic; rather, it means simply bringing in more high-level fee-paying international students.

For its seventh and final priority – and by this stage one wonders if it can still be called a 'priority' at all – the 1994 Group *Policy Statement: Enhancing the Student Experience* remembers, almost as an afterthought, something that many might have thought rather fundamental: teaching and learning.

There has been here a complete reversal of the kinds of priority that shaped the University sector prior to a marketization that started out as incipiently creeping but has now become fast-racing; and the reversal has the effect of embedding commercialization at the centre of the institutional mindset and management. It is not long, once these changes have taken place, before vice-chancellors start to style themselves as CEOs and to describe their institutions crudely as ‘businesses’. Yet more importantly for the purposes of this present chapter, these changes also have the consequence that the actual life-transforming possibilities of experience – in this case specifically those associated with teaching and learning – can now safely be relegated to the realms of the appended afterthought. The centre of the University’s activity has moved elsewhere; and teaching and learning have now explicitly become the least important of the priorities for future development of ‘the student experience’.

6

Against all this, let us introduce a brief final moment of philosophical thinking in this present chapter. Hegel, in his *Introduction to Aesthetics*, points out that there is something about beauty that is inherently excessive, unnecessary. He is arguing his case that art is, in some ways, ‘higher’ than nature: the world of nature is marked by necessity, by an intrinsic *essence* that allows of no superfluity. The sun, as it were, is *just there*; but a picture of the sun, a painting of the sun, is contingent. What it is contingent upon, however, is freedom: the image is characterized by ‘intellectual being and by freedom’. As Hegel controversially puts it, ‘even a useless notion that enters a man’s head is higher than any product of nature, because in such a notion spirituality and freedom are always present’.¹⁴ In this lack of necessity, we see the possibility that art, precisely in its ‘excessiveness’ or in its ‘unnecessariness’, can yield the possibilities of freedom. Such *playful waste*, as we might now call it, provocatively, is precisely the counter that is required against the triumph of ‘efficiency’. As we have seen, the drive for efficiency is what precludes the possibility of experience – and now, we can also add, of freedom itself.

Playful waste, as I am calling it, is that kind of activity that produces *time*, produces time even in the form of a ‘waste of time’, an expanse of time; but, for experience to happen at all, it is precisely time that we need. Time allows for the possibility of historical change. We will

look later at whether the usual undergraduate degree programme of three years duration is sufficient; but, for the moment, let us remain with the philosophical position that says that a University programme should be concerned with the production of time itself, and not with an alleged 'efficiency' model that says more must be crammed in to less by eliminating the time required for play or, indeed, for thinking. Voltaire once suggested, close to despair at the banalities of philosophical Optimism, that we might abandon the grand scheme of things and 'cultivate our own garden'. The analogy here, for my own purposes, might very productively be made with gardening: playful waste is like compost – it needs time to settle in order to generate fresh life and growth.

My final philosophical remark here comes by way of Hannah Arendt. Arendt broadly follows these Hegelian tendencies when she comes to consider authority and historical agency. Specifically, she argues that our very humanity is bound up in our capacity to 'begin' something, to initiate or to 'authorize' something. That is to say, we define ourselves as human subjects, historical agents, precisely to the extent that we can differ from that which has been handed to us. In terms relevant to these present pages, and to arguments about knowledge in the form of modules that are to be transmitted as commercial units, the argument has a great power. If we accept the terms of the student experience as something essentially commercialized and thereby flaccid, then we arrive at that odd state of affairs in which the graduate has no authority. In short, we arrive at the position where the graduate has learned nothing – nothing, that is, except the demand for conformity to established rules and conformity to the practices of consumerist capital. Against this, we might place Arendt's description of authority as something that 'implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom'.¹⁵

We should note that this authority does not imply some kind of anarchy whereby each and every individual makes their own rules; rather, it is a carefully modulated notion of authority. Implicit in this is a sense that there is a demand – here called 'obedience' – a demand that seeks to base behaviour upon an authority that eschews coercion – including the silent coercion to conform to models of efficiency and consumerism. In short, the authority here – and this is the kind of authority that can only be gleaned through the experience of learning and teaching – is one that is communal, not atomized into the individuated experiences of single consumers. It is an authority that is gained through play; and, as in play, it is an authority whose entire point is to offer authority to other players, to bring more participants into the game. The result is not simply a wider distribution of authority and of power; it is also the establishment of

a public sphere in which each player has an interest, but an interest in extending authority and participation ever wider.

If there is to be a future for the University as an institution that has an important social role, and a role that involves an increase in freedom and autonomy for the entire community that sustains the institution, then it follows that we must abandon the myth of 'the student experience'. That myth leads only to coercion and conformity; to abandon it is to take the risk of learning, and with it to embrace the demand for freedom.