



# Chapter 12

## Colloquium



Naomi Hodgson , Joris Vlieghe , and Piotr Zamojski , with the collaboration of Richard Budd, Oren Ergas, Jarosław Jendza , Tyson E. Lewis, Lavinia Marin, Hans Schildermans, Łukasz Stankiewicz, Christiane Thompson, Stefan Ramaekers, and Wiebe Sieds Koopal

### Introduction

This concluding chapter draws on a discussion that took place at the end of a symposium on this book, to which a number of its authors – Richard Budd, Jarosław (Jarek for short) Jendza, Lavinia Marin, Hans Schildermans, Christiane Thompson – contributed. The wider membership of the Laboratory for Education and Society at KU Leuven were invited to the symposium and some of those present – Stefan Ramaekers and Wiebe Sieds Koopal – also contributed to the discussion. What follows is not a direct transcription of that discussion but refers to particular contributions representative of it in order to draw out some key themes and questions.

### From Critique to Post-Critique? Is it Possible to Define Post-criticality?

It is clear that there is a shift towards a new way of looking at higher education and its research, and the contributions to this book show that it is possible to investigate the university post-critically. However, it is also clear that we might still lack a precise definition of the post-critical. Whereas this way of thinking calls for us to take care of things we value, in this case in higher education, Jarek Jendza suggested that the ‘idea of post-criticality is [itself] very delicate’, and hence we have to be very careful and even ‘overprotective in the case of the words we actually use, in order to

---

N. Hodgson (✉) · J. Vlieghe · P. Zamojski  
Centre for Education and Policy Analysis, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK  
e-mail: [hodgson@hope.ac.uk](mailto:hodgson@hope.ac.uk)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

N. Hodgson et al. (eds.), *Post-critical Perspectives on Higher Education*, Debating Higher Education: Philosophical Perspectives 3,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45019-9\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45019-9_12)

protect the idea of post-criticality'. This care extends to the use of related terms such as 'protect' and 'defend': they might suggest a certain conservatism, which – as should be clear – we want to avoid.

The authors' agreement to contribute to the book stemmed not so much from a shared definition of post-criticality, however, but rather from a shared commitment to the original Manifesto's principles. Many of the contributors to the book seem to agree with one of the principles in particular; the idea of love as being at the core of education, and especially higher education. As Lavinia Marin put it, 'we are all immersed with the university, we work in it, we live in it, we study it, and we also love it! And this aspect of love, is not captured by critique'. Many of the contributions in this book try to address precisely what is not captured by critique, and it is here that we find some consistency between them. But there remains a tension – or maybe just a lack of clarity – between the critical and the post-critical. As Wiebe Koopal observed: 'Criticism is of course just deciding what is important, and in the post-critical we have to decide what we care for, but how do we know what we care for? We have to be critical at first'. Perhaps, but, as Jarek remarked of the symposium discussion: 'I've observed a significant change of language. Basically, we have avoided the dead ends of critique. In each of the presentations the language of love or positivity was present and this is probably something that we share'. It is the idea of the post-critical itself that 'is worth caring for', he continued, 'because it gave us something that we didn't have before: like talking about love in education, which usually was treated as something naïve, and in that sense not scientific. We've got a new language and we have to take care of that'.

During the discussion, the issue remained of whether there was a language of post-criticality beyond merely being what critique is not. Hence, as Naomi Hodgson put it, 'this very conversation is a sign that we don't have a new language and [so] we have to be very careful about it'. There is a risk in trying to summarise a set of chapters or a theme that we make overly bold statements, and we had to ask ourselves whether it was our ambition to capture and define everything that happened during the symposium – and indeed in the university itself – endangering its multiplicity. As Piotr Zamojski observed: 'we are not aiming at another grand narrative that would give us a clear picture of the whole. . . . [T]here is a kind of incompleteness of the insights that we are formulating. It goes without saying that we have to take into account that there is something else going on, that there is more. But we still need to indicate what we feel is important at a particular moment, as distinguished from everything else that seems to be not so important at this point'.

Rather, what we have seen throughout the chapters of this book, borne out in the discussions about them, is a bringing to the fore of experiences and practices that are of importance, and that can be recognised as such, without aiming at a conclusive theory or an all-encompassing language. So, in that sense, post-criticality is not about pinning down the essence of something. And yet, in many of the chapters it seems that the authors are in search of something essential they wish to preserve. Again, care and caution are needed, which Richard Budd compared to the method of carving statues, attributed to Michelangelo: 'Someone asked him: how it is that you can carve these amazing figures, and he said: I don't, I just free them, I just take off

the stuff that is outside of them. And – in a sense – maybe what we are trying to do is to try to actually capture what it is that higher education is’.

But, before we can start caring, shouldn’t we first know what to care for – separate the wheat from the chaff, or the sculpture from the marble? This came up at many points during our discussion. For example, Joris Vlieghe brought up the fact that students’ boredom, e.g. during lectures, is often seen as a problem and that it should be avoided, especially within the walls of marketised universities that are tailored to students’ needs and that promise them the best possible student experience. This was countered as Joris taking a typical critical stance (i.e., unveiling an ideology that holds students captive). However, his experience of teaching in such a university showed that it was possible to discuss with his students the (lack of the) importance of student experience. Most of them were able to see through the myth; no such unveiling was needed: ‘in my experience, students know very well that they are playing the game. It’s not that I have to show to them that they have false consciousness. . . . So I don’t think this is a classical critical stance’. Instead, the experience draws our attention to what is possible in the university, not predetermining the positions of academics and students a priori. The very possibility of having such a conversation is valuable, and drawing attention to it can be called, then, post-critical.

This, of course, doesn’t imply throwing the baby out with the bathwater: this is not post-critique at the expense of critique, as Wiebe implied earlier. Referring to the example above, we do not deny that it is important to draw attention to the extent to which marketisation and commodification have colonised higher education, changing the practices and self-understandings constitutive of it. Post-criticality does not deny that the student experience discourse is a myth, a form of false consciousness, and a potentially dangerous one at that. But, the question, driving not only the chapters in this book but also the articulation of the post-critical more generally is: where do we go from there? We can repeat the critical analysis over and over again, complain about the situation, and fill whole conferences with papers about what is going on and its devastating effects. In many ways, taking such a critical view is very therapeutic (it helps us to survive, so to speak), for both author and conference attendees, and it certainly is very tempting. But, as Piotr argues throughout his chapter, such a stance allows us to stand aside, to not take responsibility, and not get involved ourselves with the object we care for, i.e. the university. So, critique can be only a first step.

Indeed, as Piotr put it in the discussion, ‘from the outset, post-criticality was actually the next step after critique, not against critique. To a certain extent reading another debunking piece of research does not help to save anything, and actually does not bring much to the discussion itself’. But on the other hand, it is on the basis of the extensive work of critical researchers that we can actually ask the question ‘what comes after critique?’. The relationship with critical inquiry in education, including on the university, will remain crucial, then, in the further articulation of a post-critical stance. The critical paradigm is not an adversary; we are not opposed to it. Rather, we are taking it further; we are just taking another step.

## The Educational in the University

As this discussion and the chapters of the book illustrate, post-criticality is about drawing attention to experiences and practices in higher education that are meaningful – educationally – and about articulating this meaning, *in spite of* the many tendencies that threaten them (as rightfully analysed by the critical paradigm). The purpose, as Hans Schildermans observes, ‘is not so much about describing the practices as they are’, nor is it to ‘predict what the university will be in the future from a critical-sociological point of view. I think that what our contributions try to do is in some sense activating the possible, instead of describing the probable’. We should leave a language of description and of probability behind in favour of making a new future possible. We do this, Hans continues, by telling all kinds of stories about universities that might mobilise us and inspire action. They make us ‘response-able’, as Donna Haraway (2016) puts it. These stories, ‘instead of causing despair, give a sense of how things can be done differently’. So, the post-critical accounts gathered in this book do not merely diagnose things as they actually are, nor do they predict what mayhem, dystopia, utopia even, is to come. Instead, they might inspire us by changing our relation to the matter at hand, so that new and unforeseen things become possible – new forms of action, unanticipated university practices. They are hopeful.

Next to the concern with what the post-critical is or might be, the notion of what is educational in higher education eludes precise definition too. Christiane Thompson observed that we should not try to pin down what is educational in higher education, ‘because pinning down is what we get in evaluations. I think it’s more about also opening up possibilities’. Referring to her own use of vignettes, she remarks that these stories:

are also about trying to find a language for something without already viewing it from certain master distinctions, from a particular interpretation of reality. Just from my experience, this kind of exchange with colleagues on situations is very productive. And it is very different from a course evaluation. And I’m not going to do a bashing of evaluation, but it is really in a very different way possible to keep talking on the vignette like this, whereas evaluation is always in a way the end of it. So for me the post-critical dimension is about the production of something else. How to make space for exploring further issues.

Again, what is at stake is the opening of possibilities – the possibility of possibilities: not casting a judgment on a situation (as is the case when we evaluate the university via course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys, the UK Teaching Excellence Framework, the UK Research Excellence Framework, and so on), but precisely by speaking about what is worthwhile about particular experiences and practices.

This too carries a risk. Christiane and others warned against the tendency in some contributions to put too great an emphasis on the ‘extra-ordinary’, so that we risk painting too idealistic a picture of how the university is or of what the truly ‘educational’ looks like. For instance, in many contributions we learn about exceptional experiences and moments of full attention and captivation students might have

during lectures delivered by passionate, eccentric, or extremely talented professors. But, as Christiane adds, ‘a lot of times that I was listening to a lecture it was useless. I mean, exhaustion, disappointment, and not wanting to listen to it anymore. You could also do research on boredom during lectures, and I see students bored. And for me the point of the university is actually more about this confrontation of very different impressions’. Boredom in the university is by no means an experience had only by the ‘disengaged’ student. We have all been to conferences in those same lecture halls and experienced boredom. But this isn’t a problem: students – and indeed academics – leave the lecture hall and ‘they don’t really know yet where [what they just experienced] is going. But it has set something in resonance, and it might not be something like “I know something” or “I understood something”, but there is something that . . . maybe just a spark, maybe only a possible experience for much, much later’. In view of this, Richard questioned the current UK practice of judging the quality of university degrees and institutions on the basis of graduate employment rates 6 months after graduation. Attending university might entail a transformation, he commented, ‘that may happen at the time, or later on, or not’.

On a much more concrete level, Joris observed ‘that there is something fundamentally wrong about much empirical research around the effects of lecturing as opposed to other ways of learning. So, usually, researchers compare the effects of what students have learned, by measuring it immediately after the lecture, with the learning outcomes of people who have studied the same stuff at home, or in the library, as if these were discrete ‘learning practices’. This is missing the point, he argued, because the learning in question is not solely the result of the lecture. Normally one takes notes during the lecture, but then these notes will be studied at home, when preparing an essay or revising for an exam: ‘This should also be taken up when assessing, or evaluating, or trying to get to the meaning of what happens in the lecture’. In sum, the educational in the university is not necessarily, nor even often, linked to immediate and spectacular experiences. Its effect will be felt or become evident over time, and is often constituted in experiences that, at the time, are perceived as boring and meaningless.

In trying to articulate – but not ultimately define – the educational in the university we have seen consideration of the lecture, study groups, the teaching of educational philosophy and theory, but to what extent is what we are talking about *the* university, or only that part of it valuable to or recognisable to those in the humanities and social sciences?

Jarek initiated this line of questioning, suggesting that we potentially exclude the views, experiences, and practices of academics who represent the natural sciences. He observed:

Very often it happens that people write about the university, but in fact they write about the humanities. And so, somehow, the humanities feel that they have the right to define what the university is about, whereas we might be talking about the very small part of the university. There is the risk, that when we define the university, we do it exclusively with the reference to the humanities and social sciences.

To some extent this seems to be an inevitable arrangement: because of the nature of the subject of study, people who investigate higher education and the university represent either social sciences or the humanities. So perhaps the question is whether, in our attempts to articulate the educational in the university, we can also speak for the experiences of academics from natural sciences.

Of course, every discipline of knowledge has its specificities, and hence it generates particular uses of pedagogic forms (from the lecture and the seminar to fieldwork), customary ways of approaching various academic tasks (such as exams or laboratory experiments), not to mention the informal rules of behaviour (such as dress code or the style of public criticism). And these will vary also by country and by type of institution. Such particularity exists to the extent that Becher and Trowler (2001) speak of ‘academic tribes’. But is there something that links these ‘tribes’, something that allows them to recognise each other as academics or, to put it more precisely, as people of the university? This seems to be a fundamental question, because if we don’t have any commonality apart from being governed by university bureaucracies and external metrics and working on campuses, then perhaps we no longer form a university. So the initial question on excluding, and being able to speak for, the natural sciences in our attempt to articulate the educational in the university actually points to the much more significant issue of the very existence of the university as a set of common practices, forms, and experiences.

Interestingly, the very research Jarek reports in his chapter provides a hopeful clue in that regard. During the discussion he referred to the experiences revealed in his interviews with researchers from natural sciences. These experiences seem to express the mixture of the mundane effort of doing repetitious experimentations, observations, or other research activities, and the sublime suspension of everything that surrounds those who are engaged in them. One of the respondents to his interviews, an ornithologist, said:

The university in our life is almost everywhere. We spend our holidays with PhD candidates and then we ‘go for the birds’ – so we . . . observe them for hours so technically we work but we don’t. Once I went with my supervisor to Spitsbergen. We had a small tent, rifles, binoculars, and two coffee cups. Was it a university? Yes, of course it was! We would spend hours observing animals and then we would come to our tent, our small university and discuss the results for hours in minus 37 C outside. [Interview 7, pp. 3–6]

This excerpt shows that it might be the case that the experiences of the educational in the university are not exclusive to the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless, it seems that the voice of representatives of the natural sciences is underrepresented when considering the educational perspective on higher education and the university. Undoubtedly, then, we need to begin such a dialogue on the university with academics outside of the humanities and social sciences.

## The University as Practices Not Institution

Significantly, in all of the contributions to this book, the attempt to articulate the educational in the university means going beyond, or even opposing, its institutional dimension. According to Christiane, when stripped of its institutional dimension, the university is a form of plurality turned towards a common concern. Hence, the educational dimension of the university consists of the practices of, what she terms, 'participation in partition'. Hans investigates a university enacted *ex nihilo*, in the conditions of a camp, with no institutional resources. This shows how a university can be made, how can it begin and grow. In his chapter, Piotr claims that the university is something people can practice, which he clearly opposes to the institutional understanding of university. This is also clear in the chapter by Tyson Lewis, who locates the educational dimension of the university in practices that are useless from the institutional perspective. On this view, governed by the goal of the efficient production of measurable learning outcomes, study groups are a pointless waste of time.

Hence, the educational seems to happen at the university in spite of the institutional requirements, as a surplus or an excess of certain practices that are made just for themselves: practices that are unable to be appropriated, that are pure means (cf. Agamben 2000). As indicated in the chapter by Lavinia, lecturing is another such practice. In her writing, the lecture is not regarded institutionally, as a form that organises a particular course, but is approached as an event of collective gestures that resembles a spiritual séance. Similarly, in his chapter, Oren Ergas points to the university as a sphere in which we can try out or exercise our inner life. Joris, too, seems to conceive of the university in terms of arrangements that keep open the potentiality of educational transformation. Respondents to the inquiry reported by Jarek seem to claim that educational meetings – as a specific form of meeting in academia – have no specific place and time and, more often than not, take place off-campus (i.e. outside the physical institution of the university). In order to look for the educational in the university, Richard proposes a way to explore students' experiences, that is, to explore what happens to and between people when they are students of a (particular) university. For Łukasz Stankiewicz, it is in non-institutionalised trust that he finds hope in academia.

It seems, therefore, that asking about the educational opens another dimension to the discussion, one that counters our usual institutional understanding of the university: the dimension of a fragile, relentlessly re-activated, subcutaneous tissue of practices, forms, gestures, relations, and interactions, woven together by the people of the university, in order to make happen something in common that sustains the potentiality of educational transformation. A tissue that is increasingly colonised by the alienating institutions of universities.

## Retrieving or Reclaiming?

It was in the face of such colonisation that we, initially, set about *retrieving* the university's educational dimension: this was the term used in the originally-planned subtitle for this book. As indicated at the outset of this chapter, this retrieval is an exercise that draws our attention time and again to the language with which we do so. Caution was expressed throughout our discussion of the risks of speaking of protection and defence, lest we give the impression of a conservative stance. In seeking to find points of commonality in what emerged from the discussions, we risked trying to pin down and formalise the very openness and possibility we sought to invite.

The starting point of our discussion – and only that – was to ask whether any points of commonality between the positions had been identified. The very question seemed, to Stefan Ramaekers at least, at odds with the ethos of the project: was that what we were aiming for?: ‘... of course there are connections, but by asking about the “commonality” are you aiming at consistency or coherence, or do you want there to be running threads?’, he asked. The question was not about finding coherence but, as Naomi put it, to see if there are any ‘tensions in the way that we are using particular concepts ... two people might be using the same term, but taking up post-criticality differently’. These tensions might in themselves be interesting to explore further. In such an instance the issue is not to decide which usage or definition to use. Rather, as Jarek states:

I think this is not about how Piotr or myself understand one particular word. It is just that we have to be overprotective in the case of the words that we actually use, in order to protect the idea of post-criticality. And this idea is worth caring for, because it gave us something that we didn't have before: like talking about love in education could be treated as something naïve, and in that sense not scientific. We've got new language and we have to take care of that.

The idea of being overprotective might again sound conservative, but rather, as we find throughout the discussion and the chapters in this volume, it is a matter of testing our words, seeing whether they can do justice to the practices and experiences and their educational force. Hence, Christiane takes up the idea of commonality differently:

I just want to articulate this last point ... not so much in the sense of commonality ... but more in a sense of shared concern. For me the concept of exploration would fit very well here. You know, you're in need of a language, and I would say that, ok we all are looking for, exploring words, descriptions, places, and maybe the difference lies in what are then the sources for these explorations. And I've already mentioned that there is a word family surrounding care, concern, attention, love ... Love is actually for me quite a difficult concept, because I wouldn't dare to use it in the sense of – you know – the relationship between lecturers and students. But all these terms mentioned relate to furnishing – instead of saying retrieving – or sketching the education in the university. Not necessarily only the student-lecturer relationship but also more in the sense of topographic or other notions.

Here, as well as in Stefan's question and in a later question from Hans, the question of what is invoked by the notion of retrieving is raised. Jarek stated: ‘I have



some doubts about the subtitle or the second line of the title which is “retrieving”, and also we have mentioned the word “defend”. I believe that when we are talking about “retrieving the university” or “defending the university” we are very close to the critical stance. Generally, I think that what we share is the language and this language is completely different from the one we are used to’.

A further aspect of this is, as Christiane suggests, where we go to retrieve the university: what is the source of this retrieval? Hans asked: ‘For instance Piotr has suggested that we could recollect, to go back to memory, Lavinia referred to the notebooks of Gadamer, I went to the Palestinian refugee camp to retrieve the educational in the university, so I think we differ in that regard. So my question is also connected to what kind of university do we look at when we try to retrieve the educational? Do we look at the lecture, do we look at the seminar, do we look at the program on the West Bank, do we look at meetings, or . . .?’. The issue with the term is helpfully summarised by Richard, who draws out the assumption, implicit in the term retrieval, that it is about going ‘back to something that we had . . .’, a ‘mythical’ ‘golden age’.

As should be clear at this point, this is not what we are aiming at in the explorations gathered here or in the practice of the post-critical more generally. Hence, we needed to address, together, how to (re)articulate the project in a way that expresses that these explorations are not about tying down their meaning, as Christiane’s invocation of liminality and partition in her chapter reminds us.

The notion of retrieval brings with it not only a potential normative or ideological weight (as Joris noted, wishing to ‘defend’ certain principles and practices might be deemed conservative), but also a temporal one: a tension between going back to how things were or how we imagined them to be, and the contemporary policy preoccupation with futurity and preparedness, which Stefan reminded us of. In line with the Manifesto’s principles, what is intended here is a concern with the present, with what we do, and can do, here and now. Hence, Joris suggested the term ‘reclaim’; not, again, in terms of getting back something lost, but in the sense of (re)claiming: taking back in the present, as Hans sets out with reference to his use of Haraway in his own work:

I think that the concept of reclaiming still makes sense, because it’s not about going back to the past. ‘Re-claiming’ has its origin in geography, where it means ‘to restore the landscape that was destroyed by capitalist policies and industrial developments’. And I think that what Piotr is pointing to [earlier in the discussion] is that the university as an intellectual environment has been poisoned by neoliberal capitalist discourses that try to adopt the critical stance. Re-claiming is to foster these practices that make sense to be in the university. So it’s not about going back to the past, or restoring some kind of idyllic past, but rather a way of – to use Donna Haraway’s words – staying with the trouble, and trying to make something out of these practices that we still have.

The final summation of the book is a quote from Hans Schildermans, also taken from the symposium discussion: ‘What our chapters try to do is in some sense activate the possible, instead of describing the probable. And there we don’t give new grand narratives, but rather try to tell stories about the university, stories about experiences we had – from the stories about the university we find in Gadamer’s

books, stories we retrieve through interviews we did, stories from the camp – to activate us, and also to inspire action, or to inspire new practices. So they are not saying that this is what you should do, but rather providing another, slightly different, sense of the realms of the situation we are in. Instead of the despair, they give a sense of how things can be done differently’.

## References

- Agamben, G. (2000). *Means without End. Notes on Politics*. V. Binetti & C. Casarino (eds). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Becher, T., & Trowler, P.R. (2001). *Academic Tribes and Territories. Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.