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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Enhancing criticality and resistance through teaching in the neoliberal academy

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Abstract

Academic work and teaching in academia are undergoing major changes in the present neoliberal era. Our purpose in this article is to explore theoretically and in practice how to bring criticality and resistance to life through teaching in the academy and to demonstrate it is not necessarily always a narrative of success. The article is based on our experiences as critical scholars struggling to find ways to contribute to questions of education and social justice, both individually and jointly, over the past 20 years. In this article, we particularly want to examine some of the possibilities and challenges of bringing homo politicus back into the agenda of education.

Keywords Teaching · Higher education · Neoliberal ethos · Governance · Power · Discursive approach · Poststructuralism · Differences

You can talk the talk but what about walking the walk?

Theory and concepts for us are forms of breathing and living as well as resistance towards prevailing normativities and status quo. We are keen to find approaches that are relevant to pressing societal questions, something that makes sense of this world and our thinking. For us, teaching has always been a political activity and therefore

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bringing questions of social justice and equality into it has been a shared interest. In this article, we examine some of the possibilities and challenges of bringing *homo politicus* (Brown 2015) into the agenda of university teaching. We do this by presenting a tangible case and by examining the making of academic subjectivities in universities in times of neoliberal ethos by adapting critical poststructural approach.

Neoliberal welfare state reform has been characterised by the transformation of the administrative state. It was previously responsible for human well-being, as well as for the economy, but nowadays the state enhances competitiveness and efficiency and gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledge through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives (Davies and Bansel 2010, p. 247; Brunila and Ylöstalo forthcoming). It is not only competitiveness and efficiency that are shaping citizens but also even more persistent changes in the ways citizens are perceived and how they should perceive themselves. As Davies and Bansel argues "it is primarily this reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs, and of institutions capable of producing them, which is central to understanding the structuring of possible fields of action that has been taking place with the installation of neoliberal modes of governance". Among other institutions, universities have been reconfigured to produce the highly individualised, responsibilised and entrepreneurial subjects (Ibid., p. 247).

The neoliberal ethos works through governance that both shapes and enables academic activities. According to Brown (2015, p. 134), neoliberal governance means moving from hierarchies to networks, from institutions to processes and self-organisation. In parallel, the responsibility shifts to smaller units, as responsibilised and self-sustaining students and workers. The neoliberal ethos shapes the ideal human subjectivity as not only autonomous and self-managing but also one that obeys commands. In relation to *homo politicus*, as Brown shows, human beings in the West have until recently always been seen as something more than *homo oeconomicus*. But it is only with the emergence of neoliberalism that *homo politicus* is finally vanquished as a fundamental feature of being human and of a democratic society.

One of our key insights has been the need to tackle this pervasive individualism imposed on academic teaching practices. This is especially crucial in an era of major societal changes and multiple crises, and where tendencies to normalise and individualise problems, policies and practices inadvertently either fulfil or limit human subjectivity.

As Davies and Bansel (2010) suggest, there is a need for the working out of localised strategies of collective engagement that resist and revise the neoliberal imperatives of heightened individualisation, competition and responsibilisation of academic workers. Resisting the discourses of entrepreneurialism and competition might involve acts of collegiality (making time to talk), collaboration (refusing to work in isolation and competition) and collectivity (problematising institutional structures and practices and generating proposals for reform) (Davies and Bansel 2010, p. 57). In this paper, we give one example of this kind of local attempt of resistance.

Our purpose is not only to talk the talk but also to walk the walk. In other words, we aim to explore what it means to bring criticality and resistance to life through teaching in academia, both theoretically and in practice. By bringing in a real case

and our reflections our attempt in this article is to verbalise and politicise some of the public secrets related to working in a university as well as our experiences as critical scholars who have struggled to find ways to contribute to questions of education, critical thinking and social justice and equality, both individually and jointly, some of us for the past 20 years.

We draw our theoretical underpinnings and practical experience from a variety of sources. We began our educational and teaching practice in different fields, including corporate competence management, human resources development, training and counselling for unemployed adults, and gender equality projects and adaptation coaching. For the last decade or so, we have all been working in academia—developing courses, PhD seminars and new pedagogical practices both individually and together while undertaking and publishing research on various themes in the educational sciences. In this article, we endeavour to understand and write about the process of recognising the things that frame our seeing and understanding, as a process of establishing a dialogue with readers about which discursive policies and practices are being followed within the neoliberal ethos and beyond (e.g. Brunila and Isopahkala-Bouret 2015; Ikävalko 2016; Honkasilta 2016). Furthermore, because we wanted to elaborate our work by promoting a continuous mutual dialogue, it seemed logical as well as inspiring to continue it in this paper.

Most explicitly our intellectual and teaching practices have been influenced by the tradition of poststructuralist and feminist theories. Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power have been influential, and they enabled us to become more critical and sensitive to discursive power relations and the subjectivities and the differences shaped by them. According to Foucault, power is not understood as something that originates in the individual or position. Rather, it is considered to be a general, omnipresent, multidimensional and multilevel principle of production (Foucault 1970). Accordingly, it has led us to focus on how power produces meanings, differences and subjectivities rather than on explanations of the inevitable (St. Pierre 2001; Davies 1998).

The intersection of critical tradition and feminist theory has developed our sensitivity towards societal differences, such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, age, sexuality, health and dis/ability. It has offered us the potential to strengthen our engagement with everyday politics and our resistance to neoliberal pressures in higher education. One of the key guidelines in our teaching has been to demonstrate and remind ourselves, and our students, that the choices people make stem not only from the individual, but from the condition of possibility—the discourses which prescribe what is desirable, but also what is recognisable as an acceptable form of subjectivity (Butler 2008; Gill 2008).

While writing this article we were informed by data which included diary and observations from the international workshop we focus on in this article, feedback from participants, discussion and talks, our joint planning sessions, reflections with other colleagues, theories, etc. We call this kind of data production 'drifting' (St. Pierre 1997; Precarias a la deriva 2004; Colectivo Situaciones 2003). This orientation refers to discussion based on many kinds of data and to the change of the data, which takes place with the change of the knowing researcher. The data have indefinite limits and they cannot be reduced to a certain place, time or person, nor

is it necessary to do so (Ikävalko 2016). The drifting researcher participates in the birth of the research data and "lives through their research" (see for example Brunila 2016). In addition, the drifting methodology means the movement between different theoretical approaches. The researcher can try many approaches in relation to their subject and to let them discuss and indeed dispute among themselves without a "final" solution. The conflicts can be left in sight.

The case of 'bringing critical thinking into life in academia'

We all worked in a prestigious Nordic University striving to get to the top. The university had a new initiative in 2012 to develop its teaching, including the establishment of its Teachers' Academy, the first of its kind in the country, probably in the world. The Academy was created as a network of distinguished university teachers. Its official narrative was to invest to in the best university teachers and in the highest quality of teaching. The theoretical cornerstone of the Teachers' Academy was the concept of the scholarship of teaching, which placed teaching at the centre of academic competence on a par with research. The Teachers' Academy began rewarding both outstanding teachers and the communities that support their work. The application process was long, and it was declared as to be highly competitive. All the applicants needed to perform their teaching skills in a certain way that linked them to excellence and provided a vast number of recommendation letters. The selected teachers were recognised publicly with diplomas and as permanent members of the Academy and received a personal 2-year grant. In 2013, Brunila was strongly encouraged to apply because of her previous awards and nominations for promoting equality and social justice through teaching. She then decided to apply while experiencing frustration because of the whole performance. Nevertheless, she was appointed as one of the founding members of the Teachers' Academy.

The funding with the award created excitement because of quite a substantial amount of funding along with the award, which could be used in any way one wanted. Some others used it to buy computers, to travel abroad or to give all the funding away. Brunila, Ikävalko and Isopahkala-Bouret and a group of other senior and junior critical researchers enthusiastic to make a difference started thinking about a suitable strategy and how to use the grant in a politically relevant way. As a group of 12 researchers we met several times and came up what we thought a careful and clever plan. Because of the funding, we were able to conduct an international and multidisciplinary 1-year workshop entitled 'Bringing Critical Thinking into Life in Academia' for a substantially large group of participants. We wanted to make it as open as possible and open to participants from all over the country. The team worked hard to put the programme together.

Although we were concerned about whether 'criticality' would still stimulate interest, the workshop turned out to be a success. With the funding we could finally invite the best possible critical scholars from all over the world to engage with us. For the educational sciences as for the Faculty this was rather unique. All the critical scholars we contacted from around the world replied to our request instantly: 'yes, I'm in'. They came to (town) to collectively help bring criticality back. We had more

than 70 participants—both academic staff and students—from several universities. That was amazing and we all felt great joy and pride for our work that seemed to matter and be meaningful.

Our specified goal was to engender more spaces for critical discussion in academia and provide some tools for participants to reflect and renegotiate academic subjectivities and collectivity. The other aims of the workshop were not defined precisely in advance, since it was not our purpose to control the process too much and to know beforehand what was going to happen. Our aim was to study the process and let it form in peace and without trying to master its every detail. We aimed to distance ourselves from the dualism of success and failure and from calculating the significance of the workshop. We refused to try to control beforehand how the workshop sessions would interconnect and what meanings and insights they should produce. Not surprisingly, this 'letting go' was sometimes hard. We realised how used we were to the quantitative assessment of academic work based on constant evaluation, numbers and other external features. For example, what does it tell us, if there is little or no discussion after a lecture? Does it mean the session wasn't successful and the theme not interesting nor important?

Putting theory to work

The changes that academia and academic work have gone through in the neoliberal ethos are extensive from the tightening connections between the economisation of academic life and knowledge (Holmwood 2017; Dzisah 2010; Etzkowitz, 2016; Slaughter and Leslie 2016) to the organisation of academic labour, activities and sense of self (Bottrell and Manathunga 2018; Petersen and Davies 2010; Gill 2009; Davies 2005). Even in Nordic higher education systems, university teachers have experienced the pressures of global, neoliberal education policy with its demands for efficiency and performativity (Jauhiainen et al. 2009; Nevgi and Korhonen 2016). In addition, university teachers are expected to conduct both research-based teaching and high-quality research while the time provided for research is less than that for teaching. This is due to a lack of staff resources, yet teaching kudos is not as highly regarded as research experience (i.e. list of publications) when navigating from one fixed-term contract to another.

Yet, although a mass of critical literature relates to the neoliberal ethos and academia, it is surprising how little tangible resistance this intellectual turn has created in university teaching practices (see however Bottrell and Manathunga 2018). University teachers are caught up in a process of both doing and undoing the neoliberal discourse; neoliberal technologies have managed to take hold of academic teaching, because the engagement with neoliberalism is seen as necessary, pleasurable and dangerous at the same time, as there is a sense of power to resist (Davies and Petersen 2005).

When we began to write and explain our theoretical stand for this paper, it felt crucial to start with our biggest concern, the alliance of the neoliberal ethos and individualism (e.g. Davies and Petersen 2005; Brunila and Valero 2018; Valero et al. 2018; Atasay 2014). First, we decided to follow political philosopher Brown

(2015) who elaborated Michel Foucault's idea of the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism and to *homo oeconomicus*. For Foucault, the crisis of liberalism gave birth to neoliberalism as well as to *homo oeconomicus* as a man constantly interested in economics. Brown (2015, p. 84) goes further by arguing that "*homo oeconomicus* is made, not born, and operates in a context replete with risk, contingency, and potentially violent changes, from burst bubbles and capital or currency meltdowns to wholesale industry dissolution." In other words, the neoliberal human subjectivity is so profoundly integrated into, and hence subordinated to, the supervening goal of macro-economic growth that its own well-being is easily sacrificed to these larger purposes (ibid., p. 83).

The neoliberal ethos in 'precarious' universities works in accordance with 'public secrets' (Brunila and Valero 2018; see also Gill 2009; Davies and Petersen 2005). The term 'public secret', originally coined by the Institute of Precarious Consciousness (2014), refers to a kind of taboo that nobody mentions but which in principal is familiar to academics. The other side of the ideal malleable, potential, enterprising and self-steering academic subjectivity is the vulnerability of the individual which is kept in silence, as a secret that everyone is aware of. The public secret works by personalising problems as signs of deficit: the lack of strength of those who are not suited to win in the competition of the fittest. Therefore the neoliberal ethos needs these public secrets for power to work. The ethos thus generates a heightened sense of anxieties, stress, disappointment, self-blame and social isolation which are productive for the framing of desired autonomous academic subjects and for centralising power.

We and many other academics who teach at universities (e.g. Gill 2009; Davies and Bansel 2010) are familiar with this in our daily work and in our encounters with other colleagues and even with our students. Accordingly, as a form of resistance, these "public secrets" are what we also want to challenge by bringing poststructurally oriented critical thinking into teaching and by challenging the common ideals of neoliberal individualised and self-blaming human subjectivity.

Nowadays, education as a whole seems to be about getting the most out of students and staff, not so much by managing, but by releasing the striving of individuals for autonomy and creativity, in other words by instrumentalising autonomy (Rose 1998, pp. 160–162; Davies 2005; Davies and Bansel 2010). This could be understood as a turn from classic bureaucracies into market-driven and service-oriented forms. Together with a colleague, Brunila and Hannukainen (2017) argued that post-bureaucracy in the university context is characterised by less formalisation, more decentralisation, flexibility, enterprise, innovation, and growth. At the same time, according to the authors it also builds narratives of personal development, self-realisation and self-fulfilment in civil servants. It is thus sold on a promise of helping release academics' striving for autonomy and creativity, by enhancing specific competencies and skills such as self-presentation and self-management.

Accordingly, several educationalists have argued that the beginning of the twenty-first century has been characterised by a strong sense of disorientation about the whole purpose of education and teaching. We argue that what is shaping education as well as teaching is not just competitiveness and efficiency, but also the fact that

even more implicit changes are taking place in the ways we understand knowledge and perceive ourselves.

What we are more and more concerned about is that educational policies and practices tend to encourage individuals to locate societal problems in a 'self' rather than in society. The role of education and teaching is to steer individuals with problems towards expected and appropriate modes of being and knowing. The tendency is to operate by aiming to 'autonomise' and 'responsibilise' the self without shattering its formally autonomous character. This tends to connect political rhetoric to the self-steering capacities of human capital by creating subjects who are mentally and emotionally healthy, emotionally literate, adaptable, autonomous, self-responsible, flexible and self-centred. In terms of subjectivation, this specific type of subjectivity submits to and masters full responsibility for their own well-being and self-care while the neoliberal ethos turns structural problems into individual affairs.

Within the current neoliberal ethos, we have felt that we tend to take for granted ideas of human subjectivity as well as societal differences. Or if we do acknowledge differences they tend to become forms of essential entities or forms of identity politics by turning differences into personality characteristics. Without radically challenging the individualistic notions of human subjectivity, academic teaching may aim to tackle inequality but ends up reproducing rather than overcoming it. This means acknowledging that neither students nor teachers can step outside the power relations of gender, health, race or wealth, etc. Our positions within these power relations affect the futures we can imagine for ourselves in academia and how well we adjust to the academic hierarchies and practices.

As Honkasilta has discussed elsewhere (Honkasilta 2016), the ethos of "special" needs prevalent in the contemporary zeitgeist of inclusive education provides us with another example of the potential uncritical reproduction of fixed human subjectivities in university teaching. It is common to approach these so-called "special" needs by adhering to psycho-medical discourse. Needs are thus described through diagnostic labels and related impairments or symptoms (e.g. a child is "special", "normal", "gifted", "ADHD", "autistic", "disabled", etc.) without underlining their sociocultural premises. These premises include assessments, judgments and interpretations of the absence of ability or lesser ability in comparison to ideals of "normal", this being what is statistically frequent or valued and desired (e.g. Kittay, 2006). In so doing, complex issues of governance of valued subjectivities and the normalising role labelling and categorising plays in this, and their reproduction in social interaction and other forms of (education) practice, tend to be reduced to descriptions of alleged individual traits and deficits—to ideas of value-free vulnerable subjects devoid of a history of oppression.

We therefore wish to promote the notion of human subjectivity and homo politicus, understood as consisting of multiple 'voices' which are not 'freely' chosen and removed from the surrounding circumstances.

Perhaps a good example of this is the debate between special education and disability studies (e.g. see the debate between Anastasiou and Kauffman 2010, 2011 and Gallagher et al. 2014) in which the ontology, epistemology and axiology of forms of dis/ability and dis/abled subjects in education are discussed within the paradigms of critical realism–relativism and structuralism–poststructuralism (similar debates also

appear within both disciplines). To promote homo politicus in (future) educators, it would be of importance to teach and guide students through processing educational phenomena from various paradigms and perspectives.

In addition to including new ideas of human subjectivity and homo politicus in the content of education, there is also a need to bring them to bear in critical pedagogical practices. For example, if most teachers and students are positioned as able, white and middle-class, their experiences tend to become a silent norm in joint discussions. The challenge for the university teacher is to make sure that multiple voices can be heard so that middle-class, able, cisgendered heterosexual whiteness does not come to represent normality or a normal human being. The more those homogeneous representations are produced in teaching, the more it takes for an individual to resist these normativities. That said, when normativities are resisted it tends to take the form of a confession, leaving the 'normal' untouched (see Naskali 2014; Jones 2004). The ethical and political obligation of a critical teacher could be a constant effort to challenge normativities and avoid speaking about 'us' or about shared experiences.

Feminist poststructural critique has had the potential to challenge the individualistic and uncritical tone referred to above. In particular, the feminist poststructural theories do not turn towards a pursuit of freedom, emancipation or authenticity, but rather to practices of self-subjugation to the hegemonic values and ways of being (e.g. St. Pierre and Pillow 2000; Spivak 1988; St. Pierre 2001). Feminist critique has reminded us that the 'authentic experiences' all too often turn out to be Western, white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual and mainstream. Without an explicit focus on the multiplicity of human subjectivity, the diverse and contradictory nature of the experiences is neglected.

Returning to the case: putting homo politicus to work

This is something I have never experienced before while studying or working in a university (feedback from a participant).

We believed the workshop provided an opportunity to gain new understanding and foster critical thinking in teaching and research at the Academy. In order to involve all participants in the process, dynamic group-work was used in addition to the guest lecturers who gave brilliant and sharp talks. During the process, participants addressed the following questions: What does it mean to be critical in academia? What are the conditions that foster critical thinking? How can critical thinking be put to work in teaching and research?

The workshop was intended to provide university lecturers, researchers, and PhD and master's students—all academics who participate in teaching and research in different ways—with theoretical and practical insights into critical thinking and an opportunity to rethink academic subjectivities and collectivity. The workshop tackled the challenging task of bringing critical thinking into everyday pedagogical life. Participants were given conceptual tools to investigate the relationships between knowledge, power and subjects, as well as societal differences, social justice and equality. The workshop also provided a context for

examining the art of deconstruction and becoming aware of the arbitrary, construed nature of language.

In the workshop, critical thinking was neither determined beforehand nor linked only to traditional (Marxist) critical thinking. Instead, fresh rethinking was encouraged. All five workshop sessions during the year were designed to converge on critical thinking from different points of view. This enabled different disciplines and research subjects and methods to be assessed from various angles, and enhanced communication and conversations between different research traditions. Among the topics were the following: criticality as a process; how to cultivate intellectual independence; ethicality and solidarity as part of critical thinking; and how privileges and marginalities are re/produced.

We thought that it is crucial to remain critical of the statements of ‘criticality’; implicit standards for the right kind of critical thinking, radical pedagogy, and political activism always exist. Often all authority figures within the tradition of critical thinking and critical pedagogy are white heterosexual able-bodied males, and some have considered this group as being yet another medium of oppression (cf. Burbules and Berk 1999). In the worst-case scenario, rationalism, embedded in critical thinking and pedagogy, can be used to dominate and exclude ‘irrational’ Others—women, people of colour, nature and aesthetics (Ellsworth 1989). Moreover, it is important for our students to understand that criticality and resistance are also historical, discursive systems with particular social effects.

The workshop helped us to keep in mind that in teaching it is worth enhancing language as a tool for constructing social and cultural reality through juxtaposition, categorisation and hierarchies. Sometimes students are confused at first because they have got used to the idea of language reflecting reality instead of producing it. This approach means taking into consideration societal differences as produced through politics, culture and practices. Students can be shown how such differences tend to take the form of binary pairs. For example, gender is easily regarded as a hierarchical and opposing difference between man and woman, ethnicity as a difference between native and foreigner, and sexuality as a difference between heterosexual and homosexual. But a critical reading can demonstrate the discursiveness of the opposing pairs, their mutual dependence and the construction of their meaning through a hierarchical difference.

The course literature consisted of articles carefully selected by the organisers that invited participants to reflect on their own thinking, teaching and research practices. During the face-to-face session, discussion was encouraged, and participants were invited to bring their own experiences to the discussion during which these experiences were analysed. In between the sessions, participants met in small discussion groups and involved themselves in a collaborative process of fostering criticality. Moreover, the participants were encouraged to communicate online and join in individual and/or collaborative writing.

We aimed to make reasons for the participation as non-instrumental as possible. Participation was voluntary and we hoped that people wanted to be involved because of the content, not because of study credits or other kind of performance. Even though the participants could get credits from their involvement, it was not

about individual achievement or effort. The process was formed with others. Everyone was welcomed to choose the intensity and extent of their involvement.

The participants were offered a chance to prepare joint final outcomes related to critical thinking, and to present them during the last session of the workshop. The format of this final work task was adapted to suit everybody's best interest: there were collaborative academic essays, journal articles, a collaborative text presented in the form of a performance, and initiatives to start an activist campaign. During the workshop we realised how slow studying could be one form of resistance to the neoliberal ethos. This could mean creating spaces for academic knowledge production that does not have instrumental value, such as having a certain kind of degree or publishing a certain kind of paper.

The 1-year workshop was a relatively long period so that there would be enough time for thinking and knowledge formation. Measurable outcomes were not demanded or expected but if something new was to be born, it had plenty of time to form. We wanted to resist the constant pressure of performing and accomplishing by offering enough space for thinking and discussion. Every session had enough time for discussion and elaboration of new insights so that we did not have to "race through" every session. It is the linear concept of time and its division into smaller and measurable units that creates constant pressure and feelings of inadequacy in the neoliberal academy (Davis and Bansel 2010).

Over the duration of the workshop the participants documented their own thinking processes, and were also requested to take part in multidisciplinary research about the process. We asked the participants to reflect on the development of their own critical thinking throughout the year-long process. Prior to attending the workshop, the participants were asked to write a short description of their previous motivation: why they were taking part in the workshop; how did the topic relate to their own academic research and teaching; and what were their initial thoughts about criticality and resistance. During the workshop we reflected on the on-going process in small groups. Near mid-term, we asked the small working groups to attend openly framed-focus- group discussions, which were taped for further research purposes. At the end, we held an extensive feedback discussion. (Note: The data on students' perspectives and how they experienced the teaching of criticality and resistance in academia has been analysed and reported elsewhere.)

Bringing alternatives to the pedagogical agenda

In university teaching, language is the medium through which one can reflect and negotiate human subjectivity, and undertake a process of naming and renaming one's relationships with others and the world. During our teaching we have discovered how elaboration with a discursive approach has helped to argue that the better we understand the discursive production of human subjectivity, the more options we have in making space for various forms of human subjectivity and institutional settings that enforce homo politicus as well as social justice and equality.

Although enhanced by the neoliberal ethos, the idea of an individual who makes free choices should be abandoned. In a variety of disciplinary areas, and especially

in feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial studies, there has been a long tradition of criticality towards the notion of an integral and universal human subjectivity. One of the more frequent critiques has been the notion that by upholding the Cartesian view of the human subject and knowledge, traditional epistemological beliefs have been formulated in isolation by white, highly-educated males, while glorifying the mind and denigrating the body.

Derrida (1981) has famously shown how the constitution of an identity has been based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles—man/woman, reason/emotion, mind/body, etc. As Hall (2000) pointed out, in the Cartesian dualist order, what is peculiar to the second term in each dichotomy is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first. It is the same with the white/black relationship, in which white is the equivalent of 'human being'. 'Woman' and 'black' are thus marks in contrast to the unmarked terms of 'man' and 'white' (Hall 2000.) In feminist research, Moya Lloyd, Judith Butler and Leena-Maija Rossi, among others, have provided further understanding of the subject as ambivalent, in-process, indeterminate, and open to re-inscription (Lloyd 2005; Butler 1990; Rossi 2015).

Foucault (e.g. 1970, 1982, 2000), whose ideas have been utilised widely in the social sciences, contested the idea of the universal human essence. He considered the meaning and value of 'humanity' as something that is open and shifting. According to Foucault, instead of a theory of the 'knowing subject', we ought to look for a theory of discursive practices. In university teaching this could mean reconceptualising human subjectivity, and thinking of it as decentred.

By utilising the discursive approach while we teach, with the students we can discover how discourses produce human subjectivity, normative ways of being and doing, as well as ideas about the right kind of knowledge and knowing. Through teaching, we can be reminded of how the available discourses prescribe what is both desirable and recognisable as an acceptable form of human subjectivity. In the discursive approach, power is inextricably connected to notions of knowledge and knowing. This kind of critical approach also applies to the university teacher's position, which is understood as being located in a specific time and place. In other words, the teacher's position is always part of the cultural order.

When one considers education discursively, it can be perceived as being permeated by politics and power relations. A critical approach recognises the interest-bound and problematic nature of knowing and knowledge, in both its content and means of production. Thinking about university teaching discursively helps to challenge ideals of education. Higher education and university education have always assumed a standard type of student, who best fits the practices and ideals at any given time.

Consequently, attention is focused on the means of producing knowledge that makes teachers complicit in the connections between the very knowledge and power that they criticise (e.g. Spivak 1996, 1988). However, the privileged nature of actions and their consequences may be difficult to recognise from a privileged position. If teaching practices lead to social change, the change does not derive from the actions of a teacher or any other individual; criticality is a function of a collective

questioning, criticism and creativity, which institutions and social relations may foster or suppress (Burbules and Berk 1999).

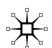
In this way, it is easier to understand how discourses in relation to social justice and equality provide the vocabulary and expressions with which to speak (and generally to exist), as if these discourses were our own (Davies 1993). As university teachers we are members of our cultures and communities, hence our cultures and communities accept us when we speak their language (Davies 1998). This is how unequal subject positions become a way of being and doing, a way to understand oneself and one's world.

When we teach, we ask students to consider how the problem is defined and whose interests the definitions serve. By referring to Foucault (2000), we remind them that if power is seen as a relationship and as being multidirectional, it does not mean pointing out 'the opposites', 'the guilty' or 'the good and the bad'; rather, the focus is on the dynamics of constructing knowledge and societal differences. Common and customary models of thought and behaviour are reproduced in politics, culture and practice because that is what people have always done and believe they are supposed to do. We may also acquire to desire or acquire to live with unfair practices while doubting their meaningfulness.

Unequal social practices are seen to be based on repetition. Repetition is a way in which 'culture' exists and becomes existent again and again. However, one can argue that repetition does not mean permanence, but that it always entails an element of surprise. The changes in discourses lead to changes in power because discourses are not closed systems. While power works by addressing its subjects, one can strategically use and adjust these positions (Davies 1998; Spivak 1996). If we bear in mind that teaching takes place within the discursive power relations that produce those who teach, we avoid defining others or ourselves as simple instruments of power. This means that university teachers always have the option to change things by 'repeating' them in a different way. In what follows, we describe one of our efforts to make a difference and to change the governing rules that define the position of academic teachers in neoliberal academia, and re-define what teaching can be in this context.

Returning to the case: we talked the talk and walked the walk and then…

After the workshop the participants described how they were able to think in a more reflective way and how they had a better ability to question the epistemological and ontological presuppositions that influenced their way of thinking and acting in academia. Discursively oriented feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial theories were recognised as being valuable for critical thinking. The discursive approaches enabled one to analyse the processes of marginalisation and subjectification and to demonstrate how the processes function and with what consequences. A discursive reading also allowed participants to analyse how education addresses its subjects and compels them to internalise the conceptual environment.



Our experiment with a critical thinking workshop pointed to promising consequences; it is (still) possible to enhance critical thinking and action through teaching in academia. The workshop attracted a high level of participation and the interest of university management, including the leaders of the Teachers' Academy. In the 2 years that followed, the collaboration that began or was strengthened during the workshop resulted in three co-edited books, and several research articles, critically framed PhD theses, and seminars.

However, the workshop was unable to gain any kind of institutionalised position in the faculty's teaching programme. The following year, when we applied for funding to continue with this concept and run a new 1-year workshop, our application was unsuccessful. The reason was not a shortage of funds, and the decision was very much aligned with the neoliberal organisational rationality: the faculty wanted new initiatives, and only completely new courses could be funded. There was no reward for the work well done, for the strengthening of existing endeavours, or for a willingness to continue the proven success of the workshop. Instead, uncertainty, change, and new projects were always preferred. This is something we understand as a form of projectisation of academic work. We were devastated and disappointed. Eventually our collectivity weakened, the planning group separated and we all carried on our own individual ways in different directions.

The collectivist, non-hierarchical solidarity and voluntarism that characterised our workshop were critical of and resistant to the organisational culture of the neoliberal university. It enabled individual scholars to enhance criticality in their own teaching, research and making of academic subjectivities in general. However, it was only a one-time event and there was no organisational support afterwards. We did not have further resources to invite visiting speakers and we were all expected to provide teaching elsewhere as well as to apply for funding for new projects. The prime movers of the workshop were later occupied with reporting, publishing, administration, and many other teaching obligations, as we were trying to renew our short-term employment contracts in academia, become tenured, and gain other research funding. Thus, the publishing of the results from the workshop experiment was postponed, and the findings were even at risk of being silenced altogether.

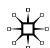
Conclusion: from homo oeconomicus to homo politicus?

Alongside with some of the recent neoliberal developments in the field of higher education such as marketisation, privatisation, digitalisation, and datafication governance tends to become more personalised and efficient. However, as we aimed to show teaching in academia can provide opportunities, and, at best, a condition of possibility through which homo politicus might be constituted and made sustainable. The power associated with teaching must be understood as multidimensional, as a relationship that affects all parties involved. The choices are regulated, but do not exclude other options. Understood this way, power not only shapes but also produces opportunities to engage. Those addressed by this power can move between and within discourses that serve to distinguish and create hierarchies, as well as to see how discourses can change these hierarchies at any given time.

The discursive approach to power and human subjectivity suggested here could avoid reproducing essentialist identities which is one of the main points we aim to make. In this article, we have suggested that human subjectivity could be understood as a subject-in-process and as the redeployment and effect of power. Butler (1990) stated that “the subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain re-signifying process” (p. 13). If the practices of teaching are regulated processes of repetition taking place in discourses, this means that the option also exists to repeat them differently. Indeed, it is the very constitutivity of the subject that enables the practices to act within these forms of power, which are not only regulating but also productive. Because the capacity to act is not a possession, there is no need for a pre-existing subject in the agency.

The power of the neoliberal governance of academic teaching is not directly oppressive; however, in more or less subtle ways, it causes collectivity, critical thinking and resistance to weaken or even vanish. Even if we know what to do, and have proven knowledge of how to do it, it is still a constant struggle to chase the opportunity to enhance *homo politicus* (Brown 2015) and maintain collectivity as well as resistance and intellectual independence. As in the case of our workshop, the resistance may remain temporary, situational and not able to create any permanent change in academic practices or subjectivities. We still believe it is important to generate even occasional cracks and interruptions in the neoliberal academic ethos and create spaces to rethink our academic subjectivities. Resistance can still have the potentiality to shift understanding. This does not mean that all academics should be able to act together at the same time, but that enough acts of resistance would intertwine so that a collective effect is acknowledged. Important to this is recognising critical voices related to neoliberalism. Although the workshop was just a one-time event, we are not saying that resistance or doing it otherwise is dependent only on institutional support. However, it takes a lot of effort to maintain those kinds of critical practices without collective support, or if the resistance risks altogether individual researchers’ positions in academia (e.g. Ahmed 2017; Brunila 2016). This may be the reason why there are so few examples of strong resistance inside the academia and why some critical scholars choose to leave academia.

After written this, we still must remember that where there is power there is always possible and necessary resistance or plurality of resistances (Foucault 1990, 95) taking place constantly in academic ambivalent practices everywhere and disrupting subjectivities. In spite of these constant ambivalences neoliberalism has brought, we want to consider academic subjectivities as a resource for resistance while being suspicious of efforts to uncritically develop and improve. If there is no hope, conditions for hope must be created. By scrutinising ways in which the neoliberal academy is constructed nowadays and how academics are entangled in the governance offers a condition of possibility for the homo politicus to be constituted as well as a possibility to create room for more collective and critical thinking with a chance of unpredictability and a possibility of becoming and change.



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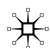

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