

Author Response: Provocative education – from The Dalai Lama's Cat[®] to Dismal Land[®]

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When we engage with Žižekian thought, we might conceptualise contemporary education as part of wider machinery to perpetuate and deepen the grasp capitalism has in a globalising world (also see Furedi, 2006, 2010). We might see how ideas, knowledge, and ‘everything else’ (c.f. Hawking, 2001, 2007) can and is packaged up into forms that are easily consumed by audiences buying the educational objects. Such processes of commodification actively render objects to the audience for sale, and appear across all spheres of human activity; this is why we must remember that according to some philosophical stances, the signified has a slippery relationship with the signifier (c.f. Lacan and Mouffe, 1985). Three examples help animate this phenomenon and some of the different consequences of it. The first example illustrates how commodification can apply to areas of life that we might think of as difficult to capture spiritually or experientially: now, for time-poor people who want to quickly reap the existential benefits of Buddhism, there is a wide range of easily accessible texts at affordable prices to choose from. Titles include “Buddhism for Busy People”, “Buddhism Plain and Simple”, “The Little Book of Buddhism”, “Buddhism Made Simple”, “Buddhism: for Beginners!”, “Buddhism for Dummies”, “Sit Like A Buddha”, “Hurry Up and Meditate”, “Enlightenment to Go”, and “The Dalai Lama's Cat”. In and through such texts, commodified *versions* of Buddhism *appear*, much the same way as Buddha-like statues *appear* in NASA photos of Mars (Feltman, 2015).

We saw the same phenomenon in September 2015 when Donald Trump launched his 2016 presidential election campaign, the second example of commodification. What was more interesting than the election campaign was perhaps one of the Facebook[®] responses which went viral, namely the “*15 Things That Look More Like Donald Trump Than Donald Trump*” post. The ‘15 Things’ included a piece of sake sushi (a slice/flap of salmon on rice), a doughnut with an extra tall mount/mess of cream on top, an ear (or cob) of corn with wispy strands of silky hair on top, and a triad of monkeys with their mouths open, seemingly making some noise without a discernable meaning to the human ear. The post alludes the Žižekian point of circling some-thing rather than stating that thing directly; the Facebook[®] post circles what it means to be ‘Donald Trump’ more than a direct and explicit description of ‘Donald Trump’, and in doing so, captures more of ‘Donald Trump’ than the explicit description possibly could. One Žižekian explanation is that the post transcends the ‘Do Not Trespass!’ sign that limits our abilities to access the raw sensory data we could possibly access to make sense of a reality, and attempts to use a form of humour to make a more direct point about that reality. The ‘15 Things’ post, on face value, may be making comments about a particular hair style, but on second gaze, it is also making indirect comments about, amongst other things, irony, hedonism, masculinity, managerialism, and exertion of voice and power with others, over others. The indirectness allows and enables the audience to experience something without a pre-determined, and therefore hegemonic, interpretation.

The final example reached media attention in August 2015, but with slightly different consequences. In the South West of England, hundreds of people queued for hours, and some even overnight, to secure entry into a new attraction (BBC News, 2015a). What was the new attraction? It was the “Dismal Land Bemusement Park – a festival of art, amusements and entry-level anarchism” (Dismaland.co.uk, 2015). The website explains:

Are you looking for an alternative to the sugar-coated tedium of the average family day out? Or just somewhere a lot cheaper? Then this is the place for you. Bring the

whole family to come and enjoy the latest addition to our chronic leisure surplus... Contains uneven floor surfaces, extensive use of strobe lighting, imagery unsuitable for small children and swearing. The following are strictly prohibited in the Park – spray paint, marker pens, knives and legal representatives of the Walt Disney Corporation. (Dismaland.co.uk, 2015).

Commentaries of Dismal Land even reached *The Economist*:

The enchanted technicolour castle is recast as a dirt-strewn, tumble-down wreck. Inside, Cinderella-cum-Princess-Di hangs head-down from her carriage-window after a crash, while paparazzi with strobes flash the accident-scene. Elsewhere, the grim-reaper dances on a dodgem. Children fish for plastic ducks—in an oil slick—and race with model boats on choppy waters bearing cargoes of dirty refugees (standing room only), their faces as listless as any waiting in line for slaughter... Children warm their hands against a radioactive glow at their feet... Gustav Klimt's kiss is projected onto a Syrian wall, punctured by artillery shells. The police and their tools of surveillance are omnipresent, a lurking reminder of the force required to keep fractured societies in check. One room is occupied by a model suburb in darkness after a riot. The only colour is that of police cars flashing blue.

Perhaps more interesting that the commodification of the 'trouble in paradise' (Žižek, 2014) of Dismal Land, was the flurry of public and media reaction when reports of not being able to access the Dismaland.co.uk website to buy tickets hit the newspapers. The interesting point was the question mark that appeared over the event of the website going down – even the local government authority apparently established contact with Dismal Land organisers to ascertain whether there “was a real problem or a deliberate ploy” (BBC News, 2015a). As the BBC reported, “Social media platforms have been awash with speculation that the difficult ticketing was part of the show, where the audience is also part of the art”. Apparently “thousands have struggled to buy tickets” and a spokesperson claimed the problems were “100% real and had crashed under “huge demand”” (BBC News, 2015b). Even though we are told that the website crashed because of a huge demand, the question mark remains, and we are still unsure of the intentionality.

‘The point’ of the discussion so far may already be evident to some readers, some may quite rightly join Gilbert’s review of our new book and be questioning the ‘vagueness’ of the discussion and/or the supposed ‘intentionality’. However, Gilbert’s own words help to suggest that these demands for more precision are a symptom of the commodification that we experience in life – to tweak Gilbert’s words a little, such demands are “in the end... precisely the point and the problem”. When we look at the notes of Jacques Lacan’s seminars of 23rd November 1955, it seems he could predict how Gilbert and others may react to the ideas and intents of Žižek and indeed our new book. In this seminar, Lacan articulated the problem as this:

You will observe in the training we give to our students that this is always a good place to stop them. It’s always at the point where they have understood, where they have rushed to fill the case in with understanding, that they have missed the interpretation that it’s appropriate to make or not to make. This is generally naively expressed in the expression – *This is what the subject meant*. How do you know? What is certain is that he [sic] didn’t say it... it appears that at the very least a question mark could have been raised which alone would have been sufficient for the valid interpretation, or at least the beginnings of it. (Miller, 1993, p22).

Indeed, we use theory to conceptualise complex phenomenon as simplified models, and this has certainly featured within business and management education (for example, we can conceptualise the functional activities of marketing as the easily consumed idea of ‘The 4Ps’ (product, price, promotion, place), 11Ps, 40Ps and upwards – each battles for hegemony over which one is a more accurate representation of the practice of making marketing decisions. However, we do the same beyond theory, for example, how the people in power essentialise the characteristics teachers, students, mature students, immigrants, refugees, international students – and also use such renderings as political instruments towards political ends (see, for example, British Future and Universities UK, 2014). For example, when Wall and colleagues examined the label of ‘international student’ (Wall, 2015; Wall and Tran, 2016), it did not necessarily relate to a supposed natural, homogenous categorisations related to place of birth, passport status, or ethnicity, but could include property ownership and legal residency status in the UK. Yet this label was often used to describe a distinctive group understood to as ‘deficit’, often related to language and critical thinking skills (ibid; Ryan, 2011).

So in this way, becoming highly specific and explicit about particular Things can have problematic consequences in relation to how we make sense of and interpret our worlds. When we comply with such notions and demands, we can land in a place that Lacan refers to as ‘dialectical inertia’, where we may think we have reached an understandable ‘kernel’:

Whether there is or not, is of absolutely no interest at all. What, on the contrary, is altogether striking is that it’s inaccessible, inert, and stagnant with respect to any dialectic. (Miller, 1993: 22).

One forgets that the dialectical changeability of actions, desires, and values is characteristic of human behavior and that it makes them liable to change not only from one moment to the next but constantly and even that it makes them pass over to strictly opposite values as a function of a change of direction in the dialogue. (Miller, 1993: 23).

Indeed, Ramsey (2011) critiques this problematic within the context of management education. Ramsey (ibid) highlights that there are different modes of engaging in/with/through theory; one is to engage with theoretical ideas as cause-effect explanations of the world (c.f. Sutton and Staw, 1995), enabling us to develop appropriate actions; a second is to engage with theory to enable us to make sense the world as we experience it as well as the ‘interim struggles’ of doing so (c.f. Weick, 1995). A Lacanian scholar might suggest however that both of these are not necessarily free from ‘dialectical inertia’. However, Ramsey articulates a third type of engagement built on and through social constructionist ideas, holding the dialectic space more central to the use of theory and constructs. She calls this proactive theory:

In using the term ‘provocative’, I seek to shift our attention away from consideration of the substance of a theory, concept, framework or research finding towards how management-learners appropriate ideas from within such management thinking to their day-to-day managerial practice. Provocative theory is a relational process rather than a type of academic thinking and is seen as a process whereby academic theory stimulates, incites and promotes changed practice as learning (Ramsey, 2011: 469).

Later she goes as far as to say:

For the academy, such a provocative theory suggests a shift in our emphasis on the substance of academic theory to the potential use of that theory. It also means a need

to attend to the rhetorical attractiveness of academic theory within learning and teaching contexts... provocative theory... provides space for management learners to experiment with and evaluate ideas, rather than emphasizing the development of sound understanding of those theories. (Ramsey, 2011: 480).

Adopting such an engagement, Ramsey (2014: 479) conceptualising her learners as ‘dancing’ with ideas and constructs, in the context of moment-by-moment relations with others. Perhaps this is what a Žižekian gaze at education does, or might do, when we loosen the need to avoid vagueness and be aware of intentionality? And perhaps we can find even more engaging dance moves (insights/actions) when apply the same to ourselves and our own behaviours? In this way, I would like to agree with Gilbert’s review of our new book and reaffirm that “In the end, the paradoxical nature of a Žižekian gaze at education is precisely the point and the problem”. Dancing with Žižek and our new book may run against the typical demands placed upon us in society, particularly within commercially oriented educational contexts (Wall and Jarvis, 2015), but at least we will have both explored and created our own interpretations, gestures and outcomes en route.

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