Dear Learner: Shame and the Dialectics of Enquiry
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Abstract: In this paper I contemplate the potential of Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) to lead the teaching of humanities in Australian universities. Are there internal constraints on its happy unfolding for a future of the humanities, true to its intellectual and political projects? In its favour, the proponents of EBL cite an Enlightenment ideal of ‘enquiry’ that puts the highest value on creative, open ended and self-determined thought – a pursuit of knowledge that is not limited by the interests of any professional or economic class. These same proponents of EBL, however, are often in university positions assigned the task of bringing a more instrumentalist approach to the pursuit of knowledge. Is it all just a case of Orwellian double-speak? Probyn (2005) writes about shame as a powerful and productive state that enables us to reappraise our actions and our values. In my paper I call up two moments of shame in the recent pursuit of learning and teaching excellence at my university, in order to explore the politics of an emerging rhetoric in this arena: that of ‘learning without teaching.’

Keywords: Enquiry Based Learning, Learning and Teaching, Audit Culture, Humanities, Australian Universities

In an international journal concerned with new directions for the humanities, it might be instructive to consider the predictions and the imagination of the education futurists. After all, the humanities have been invested for a very long time in the institutional settings of higher education, and their future is tied up with the kinds of teaching and learning trends that education futurists are preoccupied with. There are two kinds of education futurists; the inventors and entrepreneurs who feed their research into private industry and popular culture through futurist think tanks like the DaVinci Institute in the U.S.A., and the writers and educators associated with academic centres like The Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) of Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. What is interesting for me is that both kinds envisage a future for education that would incorporate the humanities into a paradigm of learning that, according to a certain unfolding, leads to what I identify here as the ‘learning without teaching’ thesis. It is this thesis that I question in my paper. It has come to be associated with the value of enquiry, and it is this that I am concerned with, in the context of a growing interest in Australian universities in Enquiry Based Learning (or EBL) for the humanities (Lattas 2009).

‘Google’s Top Rated Futurist Speaker’ Thomas Frey is Executive Director of the DaVinci Institute, and he has published an influential but typical piece on ‘The Future of Education’ (2007). In this treatise he describes a shift from the traditional, “‘sage on stage’ form of education’ to one where the students, transforming quickly today from consumers to producers of knowledge, fashion their own programs from the materials made available in online ‘courseware.’ He has in mind the growth of knowledge repositories and virtual facilities like the Wikiversity (2006), commenting with approval that these grassroots or ‘bottom-up approaches are quick to develop, participant-driven systems that are closely aligned to the demands of the marketplace.’ For market-favouring futurists like Frey, what he dubs ‘the age of hyper-individuality’ is all good, if we remember to build in the need for social relationships; in this regard, he cautions, his recommendation of Learning Camps is ‘only a partial answer.’ I don’t want to dwell here on the spectre of learning camps for academic study, nor on Frey’s enthusiasm for ‘a faster, smarter, better grade of human being’ - ‘human beings 2.0’ - that may be in the making (Frey, 2008). What is already here and taken very seriously, by university managers as well as by futurists like Frey, is the rhetoric of a major paradigm shift from teaching to learning. Indeed, this shift is listed by Frey as first in his ‘eight key trends that are driving change in the world of education.’ He writes that the ‘education system of the future will undergo a transition from a heavy emphasis on teaching to a heavy emphasis on learning.’ Teaching is a highly inefficient mode of delivering content, in this thought; it is ‘time-dependent, location-dependent, and situation-dependent.’ As a profession it is becoming obsolete. ‘In the future,’ he predicts, ‘teachers will transition from topic experts to a role in which they act more as guides and coaches.’
This idea of the teacher being reconfigured as guide and coach in the future is one that is found in the writings of other education futurists. It also features in a growing pedagogy for the present that draws on the currency of phrases like ‘active student learning,’ ‘student-centred learning,’ ‘lifelong learning,’ ‘communities of learning’ and so on. Futurists tend to invoke this ascendancy of the learner over the teacher in utopian terms, and its happy anticipation is rarely challenged in the form of questioning the growing chorus of calls to forsake old habits of talk about teaching, in favour of the new talk of learning. Whilst not given in the terms that I set out, which call into question this emergence of a saturating, totalising discourse of learning, one of the futurists of the Australian Foresight Institute does articulate a more dystopian vision of this projected future.

Jennifer Gidley is an editor of the group’s book The University in Transformation, and she narrates the demise of the university intellectual in the scenario of two residual roles of the academic stepping up to claim the market place of learning. These are the course ‘broker’ and the freelance ‘mentor,’ or guide and coach.

The only hope that Gidley has in this future lies in a third possibility, a kind of intellectual elder appointment that might come from some community-based, alternative university movement that re-humanises its educational values (Gidley, 2000). This rather thinly aspired to future can be contrasted with more confident writings of other Foresight group members like Debra Bateman. In her futurist writings Bateman lobbies for the extension of a new pedagogy of student engagement that, in her words, ‘empowers them to co-emerge with preferable and positive futures,’ declaring that education ‘must become more flexible, open-ended and learner directed, if we are truly going to enact authentic and purposeful engagement…for and amongst our learners’ (Bateman, 2006). Here she adds to the call to turn all of our attention to the scene of learning as an indicator of the rightful future for education, and reiterates the tag terms of its swelling discourse.

In calling up this futurist buzz what I want to communicate is my sense that we are at a critical pivot point in our history of the university. At the very moment, and in the very way that we are claiming, in the university, to focus on teaching now, to recognise it and to embrace it, we are actually engaging in and accelerating the dynamics through which the art of teaching may be lost. In all the flurry of setting up awards for teaching, urging the scholarship of teaching, funding its projects, articulating the philosophy of teaching, the excellence of teaching, pinning it down in plans and guidelines, urging curriculum reform and the adoption of new pedagogies, it is the distinctive essence of teaching that may be missed, even repudiated, in its sublation in the discourse of learning. By essence I mean the vitality or the ‘life’ that Hannah Arendt refers to in The Life of the Mind, as it pertains to teaching. Stephen Rowland identifies something like this in his 2006 book The Enquiring University as the warmth and spark of ‘intellectual love,’ and he wedds it to the notion of enquiry. Whilst I find his account perceptive, I do not agree with his elaboration of the art of teaching as a ‘maieutic’ one. Elsewhere I maintain a critique of both the master and the midwife figures of the teacher, which are set against each other in the literature of EBL, suggesting that what is needed is a more phenomenological account, after Arendt (Lattas, forthcoming). For the purposes of this paper, however, I restrict myself to an unveiling of this idea of learning without teaching, and a contemplation of that uneasy feeling with which many of us greet the university’s new enthusiasm for what we do in the space of the classroom. It is a contemplation that I undertake through the recall of certain moments of public shame. For it is in such moments, as the literature on shame tells us, that the kind of questioning and self-questioning that is endorsed by Arendt in The Life of the Mind is at its most intense.

Specifically, to entertain this sense of suspicion, I want to think about any extent to which the rhetoric of enquiry and of learning might belong to that contemporary class of affection that appropriates old forms of anti-capitalist radicalism in service of new forms of capitalist expansion. In the field of higher education, these new forms of capitalist expansion include the unorganised ‘participant-driven systems’ of internet-delivered educational products and qualifications that Frey and others laud in the name of free trade and democratic levelling. My question is about how an ‘ultra-democratic’ discourse of learning and teaching (as learning without teaching) might contribute to such a capitalist expansion, in its appeal to the utopian ideal of a perfectly self-determined educational subject. Ought we be cynical – or at the very least mindful of any incongruity in the revolutionary gesture? I am thinking here of the advertising that welcomes you to the revolution, one that ‘will crush the lies’, where ‘there is no discrimination.’

1. See for an extensive discussion, Rossman, G. (2002); also EHOVE Career Center (2007): “Teachers will become facilitators of knowledge.... Facilitator: The teacher will guide students through learning — no longer the one who has all the knowledge and will lecture and “give” all the knowledge to the students. It will be impossible for teachers to have all the knowledge with technology that is capable of finding more than can be learned.”
Revolution Telecom is a prepaid mobile provider that will crush the big, greedy, and untouchable parts of the prepaid mobile industry in Australia. There is no discrimination - everyone gets cheap call rates, all day, everywhere, everywhere. It doesn't matter who you call, what network they're on or how much you want to spend each month, cheap rates are yours 24/7.

Before the Revolution began the prepaid mobile market was dominated by high call rates and confusing deals. The prepaid mobile Revolution was started to remove the B.S and give customers one cheap, easy to understand call rate. See how we stack up against the competition.

No longer do customers have to put up with peak and off peak periods, cheap call rates only if you are calling the same network, or inflated rates to call landlines.

The prepaid mobile Revolution offers one cheap call rate to any mobile or landline within Australia for 15c per 30 sec. Plus we offer 15c SMS for all national and international SMS.

So Help Crush the Rents of the Prepaid Mobile Market and Join Now.

Or one that promises freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, freedom of movement, if you purchase Levi 508s.
Clearly there are inherent contradictions here; messages that are the ‘Converse’ of these images of revolution.

These advertisements alert us to an effect of representation, which is to draw those whom it addresses into engagement in an emerging present reality, no matter how much the terms of that address are to a mythic past, or a past myth of an imagined new and better future. Far from bringing on the revolution, using mobile phones ‘24/7’ brings you into a world of 24 hour work readiness, as well as commodity accumulation. Brand name jeans bring you into a world of fashion conformity and consumption. There are plenty of other examples in our world of ubiquitous capitalism and they evoke the doublespeak of Orwell’s world: The Ministry of Plenty for enacting scarcity, the Ministry of Love for enacting torture (Orwell, 1949/2001). Within the world of the university, then, the question is, can we add our own ‘Ministry of Learning,’ for enacting the opposite of what it promises - in the rhetoric, say, of enquiry?

Consider these pictures. This first one is a collage of images from Warwick University’s Reinvention Centre, one of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning that were established by the UK in 2005.

http://www.vinerassociates.co.uk/public/main/index.php?content=news# (Click on Picture for October 2006)
An article in the Guardian on this Centre sets the scene for us: ‘Poonam Pattni is perched cross-legged on a bright pink, cube-shaped stool of stuffed vinyl-PVC that looks as though it might have been brought home in a Mini from a central London branch of Habitat, circa 1967 - long before she was born… Others are semi-prone on giant yellow beanbags. The furniture in here is designed to be easily moved about to create flexible spaces. Why? “Because spaces shape how we teach and learn,” says sociology lecturer Dr Catherine Lambert. “A power dynamic is established in a conventional lecture hall. Here there is no place for the teacher and the taught. It’s more collaborative, more risky. Students are at the limit of their comfort zone. They don’t sit behind the barrier of a desk. They have to move around and take part.” The breaking down of barriers is symbolic of the philosophy behind the centre’ (Arnot, 2007).

The idea is one that is catching on quickly. In the building of new learning spaces like the ‘collaboratories’ (an idea that was proposed by Wulf in 1989 and adopted as ideal for EBL by the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield), ‘flexible furniture’ such as bean bags are increasingly featured (Cultural Landscapes Collaboratory, 2008).

And the virtual classrooms of university campuses established on Second Life are heading in the same direction. Again, traces of the radical pedagogies of the 1960s can be seen in the spaces designed by the modern university’s leaders of learning; in the outdoor lecture theatres, for example, and in the bean bags of the inside spaces. In this image one can see past president Graham Davies [1993-2000] of EUROCALL on a bean bag, in the form of his virtual avatar Groovy Winkler.

What is going on with this ‘back to the’60s’ groove? Not only the furniture but the philosophy of ’60s radicalism is back on campus. Now, it is led not by the students, but by the masters. Except that now, we hear, the distinction between the students and the masters is over. The Groovy Winklers of our new communities of learning have first reversed the order of power in the teaching and learning dualism, to make it learning and teaching; then, to demonstrate that we are all in this together, that we are equals, they have dropped the category of teaching altogether, so that there is only learning. To quote Dr Catherine Lambert, ‘there is no place for the teacher and the taught.’ The ‘power dynamic [that] is established in a conventional lecture hall’ is finished. There is Groovy, on one learning bean bag among others, modelling the kind of ‘Comrade Number 1’ idea of the teacher that is currently in vogue; he will have no conventional lecture hall in his university Second Life.

Is there something seriously disingenuous about all this? Many academics harbour the suspicion. It is suggested that a new method of what we used to call teaching, a new paradigm of learning - Enquiry Based Learning - is a way of embracing and realising all of the values that they hold dear, as committed and progressive intellectuals. The proponents of EBL cite essential Enlightenment values in its favour. Chief among these is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake rather than for vocational ends, in a disinterested quest for truth and enlightenment.

It is from here that the key term of enquiry is taken. In a counterpoint to instrumentalist reason, Immanuel Kant proposed an idea of reason as a conduct of enquiry, which exceeded and excelled the knowledge that could be put into practice. His ideas informed the structure of the modern university, instituted in the University of Berlin in 1810 (Hart, 1988). Unlike the medieval university, modelled on the University of Paris, it would not tie the study of philosophy to a set of Upper Faculties containing professional arts like Theology, Law and Medicine, but would rather offer it alongside other disciplines in the humanities and sciences, in a horizontal, non-directive structure.

Whilst Kant could be taken as the father of our philosophical notion of enquiry, the philosopher John Locke has become its icon. In a keynote address on
‘Enquiry Based Learning and Enlightenment’ Manchester’s Bill Hutchings announced that ‘John Locke is our patron saint’ - adding, ‘and Enquiry Based Learning is Enlightenment’ (Hutchings, 2006: 3). The was for Locke’s account of education as a process of ‘opening’ minds, rather than filling minds with content; for his perception of knowledge as being about the dynamic interrelations between ideas, rather than the formation of a pure and whole set of doctrines and facts; and for his vision of education for all. In their love of thinking as process and not as product, these are Enlightenment insights that few of us would oppose. Jacques Derrida has reaffirmed the intellectual value of heading out on an unknown, open-ended path of enquiry, rather than arriving at an identified and agreed upon destination in scholarly work (1983). From Paulo Freire (1970), we have learning as the fruit of a democratic, liberationist approach to education. Our local champions of EBL are only urging us to embrace, in a more articulated and effective practice, the educational values that we would, and do, defend. At the same time, however, the advocates of learning as enquiry are often those in the university who are caught up in pushing us in what feels like the other direction. They are the ones who are most clearly aligned with an über-managerial imperative of change. A measure of respect for intellectuals, perhaps, on the real politics and dynamics of change; a concentrated focus on this managers’ vision of change a light bulb?’ And the answer - ‘how many university academics does it take to change a light bulb?’ And the answer - ‘change???????’ No one laughed; a hush came over the amphitheatre, and then the meeting organisers went on with their proceedings.

I want to answer this question by way of contemplating two moments of shame that I have observed - one personally and one in proximity - in my secondment to a senior learning and teaching position. In talking about these moments I am informed by Elspeth Probyn, in her 2005 book, Blush. Probyn writes about shame as a powerful and productive state that enables us to reappraise our selves and our politics. This is if the exposure and the painful introspection that it provokes do not lead us to blame others, or to cover up defensively, instead of acting to address the issue that is revealed in the moment of unhappy self-confrontation.

The first of these moments involves an executive level learning and teaching manager telling a joke in front of a large audience of academics who had answered an open invitation to hear about proposed major changes to university structure. The joke was ‘how many university academics does it take to change a light bulb?’ And the answer - ‘change???????’ No one laughed; a hush came over the amphitheatre, and then the meeting organisers went on with their proceedings.

I saw this learning and teaching executive a few days later as she prepared to chair a small working party. She appeared to have spent the weekend in some amount of shame as she made an embarrassed reference to ‘that awful joke I told,’ almost as soon as we all arrived to greet each other and take our places. In her voice, there was an awkward, self-conscious appeal to those who were her comrades in learning and teaching, to be comforted, or forgiven, or at least engaged in a meaningful discussion of the event. We glimpsed some opening up into a serious time of self-reflection and interrogation; a vulnerability to some critique from the righteous class of intellectuals, perhaps, on the real politics and dynamics of change; a concentrated focus on this managerial imperative of change. A measure of respect was struck for that bruised and questioning interiority, breaking through the routine of our learning and teaching.

What does accounting for knowledge do to knowledge? We suspect that it knackers it.
teaching meetings for that instant, indicating another conversation that we might all be having as colleagues.

This is the unseized moment to which I want to respond now. It is to consider the managerial imperative of change against what might be, for us as intellectuals, the real politics and dynamics of change. We are told that we should embrace change; we should be positive, take hold of it pro-actively, or be up for the ride. We have to be the ones at the front of the roller-coaster, screaming in glee, not at the back, clutching away in fear (an image put to me in one learning and teaching meeting). To resist change, of course, is to be inflexible instead of flexible; closed instead of open; conservative instead of progressive, provincial instead of worldly and pace setting. We want to be flexible, open, and progressive. We used to demand change, in the late 1960s. We thought that change was good. We wanted it to be fundamental change, systemic change. But for all our introduction of new liberation disciplines like women’s studies, or new forms of analysis like Marxist theory; for all our tutorials taken onto the grass outside, and alternative assessment by student peers; for all the influx of female students and the children of workers; the university has no better prospects of realising the educational ideals of our Enlightenment philosophers than it did before 1968.

So what is it in the present call for change that makes a large contingent of ‘60s-era academics fall into such a tense and wary silence?

I suspect that at the heart of our belief - as intellectuals, at least - that change was essentially good, in the late 1960s, came from our reading of the various Marxist accounts of dialectics. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, persuaded us of a theory of negative dialectics, or never ending revolution. Even the best of social movements will have points of contradiction and contention; internal differences, latent or blatant, that will need to be clarified, and in time confronted, in an ongoing and fundamentally healthy process of challenge and change. Adorno and Horkheimer’s prime example was the Enlightenment itself, in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated in 1972. The Enlightenment presented the world with a triumph of reason over magic. Adorno and Horkheimer argued, against this triumph, that the rational nevertheless retained the magical in its own scientific concepts and stories. More importantly, however, they found that despite its many positive achievements, it became repressive, even totalising, in its blind need to eliminate the magical and everything non-rational with reason. In its ideological determination the Enlightenment sought to reduce everything to the measurable and the knowable, and to refuse to accept the existence of anything that could not be pinned down and accounted for. In its cooperation with capitalism, it also needed to enable the commodification of all that it brought into forms of exchange. A bureaucratic, instrumentalist reason ensured that everything ‘unknowable’ was either repudiated or brought into its economy.

We might recognise in this ideological determination a likeness to the demand upon us now to account for teaching (along with all of our other knowledge ‘products’) in our KPI-driven world of the university. One thing to consider, then, is that the Enlightenment gives us the *knackering* of knowledge, as I called it, just as much as it gives us the *enlivening* of knowledge seen as the conduct of enquiry. When enthusiasts declare that ‘Enquiry Based Learning is Enlightenment’ this might be kept in mind; if the Enlightenment has an evil twin, might not the discourse of enquiry with which it is identified?

The learning and teaching manager’s joke about change sank like a stone in a sea of disaffection, a profound unhappiness with a momentum for change that was blind to its own contradictions. For the ‘60s-era academic, change may be good, but only if a self-questioning ethos is what guides its impulse and its shifts. It is this self-questioning ethos that Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* identifies in her reading of Kant on thinking and knowing, and on the value of enquiry; it is sorely needed at this point in our history of the modern university.

To indicate the possible lines of this self-questioning, with respect to the discourse of learning, I move to the second moment of shame of which I spoke before. In this moment, I was the subject of shame. I was informing colleagues in a faculty meeting of the decision to change the title of our ‘Teaching and Learning Committee’ to a ‘Learning and Teaching Committee’ – that is, in symbolic terms, to reverse the order of categories in the teaching and learning dualism, as noted before, so that learning comes first. In explaining the approved reasons for this change – how we should be putting the interests of students first; how we should be empowering them to become active learners instead of passive recipients of our knowledge; how this is not to be taken as putting teachers second, subjecting us as ‘service providers’ to the demands of students as education ‘clients’, because really we are all learners, in the sense of all engaging in a process of open and active enquiry, in our teaching, as in our research – I remarked that indeed, some of the leaders in the field have suggested that we give up the category of teaching entirely, and speak only of learning, with respect to the discourse of learning, I move.
internalised the truth of the critique that I thought I saw in that fleeting look. That is, I assembled all the negatives of my own ambivalence - on this question, and others arising from my time in that learning and teaching position - into the shape of an arrow, and turned it upon myself.

The result of wrestling, now, with what the substantive arguments of that implied critique might be, is to focus on the symbolic logic of that binary opposition, in relation to my present concern. The reversal of an order of power in the teaching and learning dualism is at the conceptual heart of EBL. While it takes up an issue of power in the university classroom that featured in the late 1960s, as we saw, the rhetoric of learning that it deploys - and the very formulation of ‘Teaching and Learning’ in a coined relation, in capital letters - is more recent. The structural idea of that formulation has its own recent context, and its own recent momentum.

I have been sketching here the emergence of a ‘learning without teaching’ thesis that seeks to occupy the whole field of the university (as a ‘Community of Learners’, for example Whyte, 2000) and my suggestion is that it leads to a loss of sovereignty among academics as teachers. At stake in the dialectic that follows, I submit, are the autonomy, the trust and respect, and even the existence (in the transcendental sense of appearance and recognition) of the professional teacher. This is what I have called the dialectic of enquiry, as EBL, in its dystopian rather than utopian interpretation. At the time of writing this page, I have received an ‘everyone email’ at my university confronting me with the greeting ‘Dear Learner’. Why is this growing practice disturbing? Not only the novelist Orwell, but major modern and post-modern philosophers, including Arendt on totalitarianism (1951) and Nancy on immanantism (1993), have warned us of what happens when a new thesis is born that seeks to put an end to the binary opposition from which it emerged. The problem with elevating the antithesis into a higher thesis, and refusing the idea of any further difference within, is that of getting caught up in a totalising determination. This is the need to bring the whole of the universe - or the university - into one’s purview, to account for everything, let nothing escape one’s gaze, let no dark corner remain. Symptoms of this, for the university teacher, include a denunciation of the ‘privatised classroom’; condemning the reluctance of some colleagues to be totally transparent in their teaching, to submit to peer observation of teaching, to submit their teaching resources to databases or to management review, to think that they ‘own’ their courses, and so on.

Enquiry discourse is implicated in the loss of sovereignty among teaching academics, I submit, to the extent that its proponents seek to repudiate the role of teacher and admit, at most, a position of facilitator; a kind of Learner Number One who does not instruct but only encourages the discovery of knowledge in the learner. It is here that the ubiquity of learning finds its intellectual justification in the disappearance of teaching as a matter of pedagogical principle. It is not simply that sometimes the same people who enthuse about the innovations and the promise of EBL are in learning and teaching positions charged with executing the operations of audit culture. It is also an effect of EBL purists wanting to abandon all discipline-focused, text-based teaching, and replace it with a focus only on the learner; that is on what students bring to and have at stake in the process, rather than what university teachers bring to and have at stake, in terms of disciplinary and intellectual investments, and professional respect. As Sarah Kofman (1982/1997) recalls in her reading of Kant on the goddess Isis, respect comes from a sense of awe, and is maintained in the keeping of distance; it is this distance that is being eroded in the scrutiny that attaches to an escalating demand to account for what goes on in the classroom. Overlapping and mutually reinforcing discourses of an imperative to focus on and clarify the needs of the learner, at the expense of the teacher, is what invests the value of enquiry in audit culture. The collapse of teaching into learning in an EBL ideology of learning without teaching is spearheading the assault upon what Baert and Shipman identify as the ‘Humboldtian’ ideal type of the academic. This is the self-regulating intellectual with a ‘stable sense of professional identity that is embedded in a specific discipline and a tradition’ (2005:159), who is accorded a customary level of trust and respectful distance.

It is a dispersed group of front line enquiry ideologues who are pushing at the frontiers of this assault upon the teacher. These are the advocates who are concerned to keep in formation a vanguard of pure EBL, as distinct from the hybrid practices that have emerged in the application of their methods. This can best be seen in the comparison of two articles picked from the considerable literature on EBL (or the family of pedagogies to which it belongs: Problem Based Learning, Discovery Based Learning, active learning, ‘hyperlink’ learning and so on).

In the first, Gwendie Camp (1996) considers the question of whether (in her case) Problem-Based Learning (PBL) might be a ‘paradigm shift,’ or a ‘passing fad.’ She describes an email roundtable of PBL colleagues that came up with an agreed list of essential elements of ‘pure’ PBL. Camp tells the

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2. Thursday - January 24, 2008 from ALISON jhereward@learn-on-alison.com, Subject “An Introduction to ALISON - Interactive Multimedia Learning for All”
reader, ‘By our definition, then, any program which does not place students in tutorial groups of, say, 5-10 students is not “pure” PBL, nor are programs which operate in a single discipline… In addition, if the program is “teacher-centered” rather than “student-centered,” the heart of “pure” PBL has been lost. Often faculty are reluctant to relinquish control of the learning process, so that PBL is implemented in a way which keeps the teacher “in charge” of what is learned….’ She explains that PBL programs that ‘remain true to the original conception’ fit with research on the actual process of adult learning, and with a ‘constructivist’ theory that learning does not come from teaching, but is rather ‘constructed’ by the learner based on previous knowledge.’ Lacking the ‘spirit’ of this discovery, she says, it is only the ‘half-hearted implementation’ of PBL in hybridised programs that will prevent it from realising its paradigm shift.

In the second, Gabriel Jacobs gives a pessimistic reappraisal in 2005 of his earlier claim that the concept of hypermedia - a concept which I saw as “the best hope yet for a general acceptance of discovery based learning after millennia of rejection” (Jacobs, 1992:120) - would bring about, for the first time, a pervasive educational revolution. He had thought that the hyperlink, or internet invitation to explore ideas in any direction, was the epitome of a conduct of enquiry. Experience told otherwise. The attempt to teach without teaching had not improved student outcomes, in the countries that adopted it. Countering the positions of those who oppose any ‘mixed mode of educational delivery - a balance between exploratory learning and the straight transfer of knowledge;’ indeed of the purists who seek, he says, to ‘abolish classrooms altogether (Schank & Kemi, 2000: 5);’ Jacobs confronts us with the idea that many students have neither the motivation nor the ability to discover what they need to know from their own, or from peer, or from internet resources. He maintains that ‘many basic techniques and skills, and much knowledge can be effectively taught only by explanation, not by promoting free exploration; otherwise one is building on sand’ (Jacobs, 2005).

One thing that can be discovered here, at least, is that a ‘bastardised’ form of EBL is not a thing to be feared, but rather embraced, as the only way to go, for the humanities in Australia and elsewhere. That is, one does not need to lose the teacher, lose the text, and lose the discipline, in order to pursue the promise of EBL. Perhaps – to add to the list of acronyms of the pedagogies of enquiry - we need to refer to EBT, Enquiry Based Teaching, rather than EBL, in order to bring the question back to teaching: what is teaching, as distinct from learning; what is the place of teaching in these new pedagogies, and indeed, in the future of the humanities, and the university in general?

The broader point of this paper has been that a revolutionary future for education is no straightforward path. We can never be simply welcomed to the revolution, or go back to the time before it got lost or disappointed us, because its own inner contradictions will defer our arrival at any pure heart that we imagine for it. I find in the convergence of discourses – those of the education futurists, the Ministry of Learning administrators, and the EBL purists - into a thesis of learning without teaching, the very ‘converse’ of the images of liberation and revolution with which its idea is being promoted across the contemporary university.

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