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## **When learning becomes a fetish: the pledge, turn and prestige of magic tricks**

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### **Abstract**

It is our contention that the process of higher education could be read as a commodity and in both Marxian and Freudian assumptions, a fetish. Instrumental in this discussion are; Marx's theorising of the commodity fetish (1867) that deceives by conflating the distinction between use and exchange value, and Freud's (1927) re-visiting of his theory of fetishism, where he considers the fetish in the context of dealing with separation and loss in everyday life. This paper highlights how the consequence of fetishised behaviour has led to violent outcomes, such as the policy decision to introduce a 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF). We argue that the TEF may bring about the death of learning in HE and diminish the role of academic staff. Nevertheless, influenced by Winnicott, Cixous and Biesta, we offer a more hopeful 'Teaching that is Good Enough Framework'.

**Keywords:** Fetish, Commodity fetish, Higher Education, Teaching, Learning, TEF.

### **Introduction: Violence and magic**

We begin with a provocative suggestion: that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) embedded in the United Kingdom government's *Higher Education and Research Act* (Department for Education, 2017a), and its most recent construction as the Teaching Excellence and *Student Outcome* Framework (2017b) represents an act of violence and

deception. It is not, at least at face value, a particularly unusual or heinous act of violence, or deliberately malevolent deception. We shall argue that the TEF represents a form of violence inherent within the stable of neoliberal de-regulation practices, where it is assumed that successful competition in the market, supported by accountancy technologies, motivates and supports the pursuit of '*excellence*'. Such practices have come to characterise and govern the lived experience of public and, particularly, professional life in late capitalist societies (Bourdieu, 1991). Leading to what Ball (2012, p.17) calls the 'rough neoliberal beast' that has replaced social structures with informational structures, morals and justice with profit, humanity for quotients and teaching, learning and research with commodified outcomes.

The TEF has its recent origins in the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto and can be regarded as an attempt to design a set of metrics that could be used to quantify the quality of teaching in higher education institutions (see the section 'The fetish at work in higher education for details). The assumption being that these measures in a de-regulated HE environment would allow market forces to drive up excellence, root out sub-standard teaching and provide students (now paying up to £9,250 per year in fees) with a 'value for money' educational experience. Later on, we will question what quality, or excellent teaching might be, if it is possible to provide metrics to measure this and indeed if the TEF is actually a measure that can distinguish between pedagogical practice or student experience.

Furthermore, following Cixous (1977/1991) we assert that even abstractions, including the neoliberal dialogue, represent primary acts of violence. Cixous suggests that the relatively inert act of naming will inevitably, and tragically, rob the real of its reality leaving an abstraction: the violence is exposed when she claims "all that is left of the sea is a word without water" (p.65). Just as the naming of the 'sea' diminishes the reality of a myriad of watery movements, colours, sounds and secretive depths; so to the naming of 'teaching', 'learning' and 'excellence' devalues the vitality and complexity of individual motivations and

the social relations that comprise the processes of ‘education’. Unsatisfied with the representation of the thing itself (in, for example the UK Professional Standards Framework for Higher Education (Higher Education Academy, 2011), the technologies of neoliberal accountancy attempt a secondary level of violence and (re)present the primary representation in the numerical value of metrics and the lexicon of accountability. One helpful way of conceptualising and exposing the violence and deception of performance measurement systems, and the general culture of audit from which they emanate, is to think of them in terms of the cruel disappearing and re-appearing bird magic trick, as it is depicted in Christopher Nolan’s (2006) film ‘The Prestige’.

The film begins by exposing the deceptive art of magic and importantly how there are three acts that enable a trick to be successful. In the first act, *the pledge*, the magician shows the audience a bird and asks them to inspect it, to see if it is indeed real, unaltered and ‘normal’. In the second act, *the turn*, the magician makes the bird disappear. But the trick is not complete yet. Because making something disappear is not enough to complete the magic trick - the magician has to bring it back. That is why every magic trick has a third act: the part in which the bird re-appears, *the prestige*. However, what the audience is not aware of is the inherent violence, for the bird that reappears is not the same bird. It is a new, living bird; the previous bird has been sacrificed in the second act of disappearance and its carcass now hidden from public view.

The metaphor of the magic trick is offered to expose neoliberal acts of violence and deception. We begin the process of denuding the magician by introducing the concept of the fetish, paying particular attention to Marx’s discussion of the violent magic trick inherent within the commodity fetish and to then consider Freud’s use of the fetish to explain how individuals are capable of self-deception – a process he refers to as disavowal. This paper will argue that the fetish is rampant within current, particularly English, decision making

processes of higher education policy and can be evidenced through the identification of a three part violent and deceptive magic trick. Our focus shall be on how learning has become fetishised, offering uncomplicated ‘value for money’ routes to academic and/or vocational success - all of which are presented to the public as the final act of a magic trick: ‘*the prestige*’. What has been hidden and sacrificed in ‘*the turn*’ is the difficult and troubling nature of teaching, learning and the complexity of the settings designed to support these processes: ‘*the pledge*’. It is not just that learning reappears differently in, for example, the form of the language of excellence and league tables (a primary act of violence); the act of applying metrics has been a secondary violent event which has the effect of grotesquely distorting the reality of what teaching (and learning) may actually be.

We shall first discuss the origins and use of the term fetish, then go on to explore how the fetish has become part of teaching and learning in higher education and what impact this may have. Further suggesting that audit practices such as the TEF paradoxically are responsible for undermining learning and finally offer a hopeful way to think about and mitigate the seductive power of the fetish.

## **The Fetish**

The construction of the fetish that informed both Marx and Freud arose from the European imperialist incursions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Cluley, 2014; Kearney, 2002; Pietz, 1985). We need to acknowledge, therefore, the problems of borrowing a term that was already contaminated by the history of colonialism, well before it came to be utilised by these two European men (Marx and Freud) and continues to be an ever-present in contemporary fields such as social theory, psychoanalysis, political theory, anthropology and sociology. Indeed, Pietz (1985, p.5) regards the term as having ‘conceptual doubtfulness’, ‘referential uncertainty’, being ‘indiscriminate’ and often ‘threatening’.

We are not attempting a synthesis of the two perspectives (i.e., Marxian and Freudian) but rather to use each as a lens to explore the impact of neoliberal policies on the very human activity of learning in higher education. Additionally, our intention is not to provide a wide ranging account of the evolution of fetish, this is admirably achieved by Pietz (1985), but to consider what broad themes emerge and how these are utilised by Marx and Freud. It is significant that the fetish has its origins in the liminal spaces between social systems that are so different as to be incomprehensible to each other and Hook (2012) demonstrates how, from these origins, the fetish becomes incorporated into the racist, imperialist project. The fetish is also noted to have disproportionate power over individuals and often embodied in material objects or meaningful events in the belief that this will protect from harm or make wishes come true. Within this context an important feature of the fetish is how it acts on individuals as well as wider social groups. Cohen (2017) emphasises this later point by claiming that for the fetish to have a hold, it not only works at an individual level, but it must also be able to operate interpersonally as, ‘there must be someone to believe in it’ (p.278) and that this ‘someone’ is part of a wider social process.

Thus when the concept of the fetish was used to explain phenomena that were perceived as odd or unusual, these are already embued with notions of masculinity, violence and the desire to dominate or control. We shall argue that New Public Management ideological constructions, such as the TEF, manifest representations of violence and deception and can therefore be regarded as fetishes. During the course of the paper we shall continue to highlight the uncomfortable nature of the fetish but we shall also attempt to reclaim it and rid it of its masculine violence. We also offer hope and note that fun, desire and openness are to be had in the fetish and that the fetish, as Marx indicated, is unavoidable and, as Freud contended, has a hold on all of us.

It is Marx's ability to expose the fetish as a magic trick inherent within commodities that provides the route into the discussion as to how both he and Freud employed the idea of the fetish. In *Capital*, Marx (1867) identifies two value systems, those of 'use' and 'exchange'. The use value is the matter-of-fact physicality and usefulness of a commodity, for example, a metal axe is simply a piece of wood and metal that can be used for chopping. The exchange value is unknown until the maker of the axe exchanges this product, the wood and metal thing, for money or other products. It is in the alchemic conversion from use value to exchange value that Marx articulates his understanding of how and why commodities distract their human owners and consequently become the site of fetishised behaviours. Neary and Taylor (1998) highlight how Marx regarded the exchange-value of money as having magical properties that enabled money to make more money, while extinguishing from awareness the living labour in this process. Importantly, the site for this distraction, or magic, does not necessarily have to be a physical product, as Harvey (2003) argues that hardware, software and organisational forms can all become fetishised commodities. Although the fetish may have various origins, the outcome, where the exchange value subsumes the use value, is strikingly similar.

When considering the axe, the use value of the metal and wood effectively becomes hidden, along with the labour that went into the sourcing and production of the metal, carving of the wood and the final construction of the axe, in favour of an alchemic monetary exchange value that distracts from and confounds the use value. Marx refers to this characteristic of the fetish as a magic trick that must be exposed, for it hides from awareness how the market economy exploits the worker's labour power. Marx does not provide a micro, or individual explanation for the magical ability of commodities to distract; his genius was to acknowledge that this is the result of capitalist processes where the exchange value supplants the use value. In order to bring these metaphors alive, in a way that is helpful in thinking

about the TEF, we need to invoke an additional psychosocial dimension and Billig (1999) contends that, unknowingly to Marx, his notion of the commodity fetish offers an ‘implicit psychology’ (p. 316). Subsequently, it is this that leads us to consider Freud’s (1927) concept of fetish and provide a psychosocial mechanism to explain how this implicit psychology inherent within inanimate products can distract individuals and result in the exchange value exorcising the use value from awareness.

The fetish is a provocative and well-known feature of Freudian psychology, often bound up in populist assumptions relating to sexual activity: indeed, this is where Freud first introduces the idea of the fetish (Freud, 1905). The presentation of fetishised behaviours in the clinical space at first surprised Freud but later (1927) he considered the role of the fetish in everyday life and this movement in his thinking provides an opportunity to consider how the fetish operates at an individual and social level. Freud argued that the sexual fetish originates in young males resulting from a (surprising) awareness that females do not possess a phallus and the consequent sexualisation of another aspect of the female, such as feet or underwear, in an unconscious attempt to assuage the trauma of their assumed impending castration. However, by 1927, Freud in his paper ‘Fetishism’ aligns the origin of fetishised behaviours alongside dealing with loss in a wider social world and not just the fantasy of castration. Grounded in a fear of loss, the fetish constructs a more acceptable reality and therefore the ego splits to support the possibility of maintaining two contrasting world views. A state of mind referred to as ‘disavowal’, and in our context of magic tricks, it is a state of mind that deceives us into believing the ‘reality’ of the magic.

The next section will argue, from both Marx and Freud’s conceptualisations, how education settings have become sites of the fetish, where the violence of neoliberal accountancy magic tricks can thrive on deception and disavowal, and further suggest what the consequences and outcomes are when learning becomes a fetish.

## **The fetish at work in higher education**

### ***How the fetish found a place in higher education***

Ball (2004) famously declared that education was ‘for sale’ and accordingly now a commodity functioning within a market economy. Consequently, formal education processes and structures are products of human world-making that have taken on a new significance within the recent neoliberal climate of accountability, i.e., paying for higher education (in England), publishing league tables on student satisfaction and the monitoring of graduate career outcomes. Therefore, on a macro scale, it is reasonable to conceive education as a commodity fetish (Bainbridge, 2014) with associated magic tricks that conflate the use value of what education is (processes of teaching and learning) and the exchange value ('marks' and qualification) of educational products in a market economy. Likewise, Winn (2015) identifies how neoliberal technologies hide from awareness the exploitation of individual academic labour. In the context of learning and a fetish imbued with magical potentiality, it can be argued that the human experience of learning (*the pledge*), one that requires relationships to support difficult thinking and sustained effort, has been hidden in the distraction of *the turn* and (re)presented in *the prestige*. Where it is assumed that learning is now evidenced by quantified metrics, including obtaining qualifications, measures of teaching intensity, increased contact hours and even providing ever more elaborate digital learning platforms.

Equally, a Freudian perspective would suggest that the places and spaces where formal learning occurs, have all the characteristics that would indicate the development of a fetish and the resulting fetishised behaviours. For, as humans have evolved and become increasingly social, the ‘original’ sites of learning represented by (m)other/infant or close family relationships have been developed into social and cultural spaces such as formal

education settings (Geary, 2005; Laland and Brown, 2006). The observation to be made here is that the evolution of expansive social and cultural learning spaces engender unconscious anxious feelings of loss, resulting from the separation from close relationships with others, thus setting up the conditions for Freud's view that the fetish has its origin in dealing with loss and the need to manage this by holding and acting on conflicting views. In this mindset of disavowal, it is plausible that the learner is able to avoid difficult thinking while also holding onto the view that they are actually engaged in learning; likewise the teacher can be seduced to deliver less challenging material and yet still convince themselves that they are promoting learning. Our focus for this paper is to position the TEF within neoliberal/New Public Management contexts and make the case to regard learning as a fetish subject to magic tricks and deception. Before doing so we rightly acknowledge that we are not the first to identify the fetish in HE but the original claim we make is that it is learning that has been fetishised.

### ***Sites of the fetish in HE***

The first reference to the role of the fetish in HE can be found in Culp's 1928 discussion of the PhD fetish – notably, just one year after Freud's 'Fetishism' paper (1927). Other examples include academic success (Steiner, 1936), the increasing desire for HE expansion (Naidoo, 2016) and Long's (2008) identification of perverse (fetishistic) process commonly taking place in contemporary corporate life. Long highlights the impact of New Public Management on general corporate life and, in doing so, she brings attention to the supposed role of competition to improve 'performance' and its associated public reporting. Within the context of HE, Naidoo (2016) claims that competition and the processes wrapped around this now represent a fetish and, more precisely, Cluley (2014) discusses the fetishization of 'journal lists' and suggests that high quality research is under threat from the seduction of being published in certain high profile journals.

Cluley's focus is on Freud's construction of the sexual fetish from which he considers the role of the libido and ultimately comes to the conclusion, from a consumer marketing background, that the fetish has a limited ability to explain consumer behaviour. He does so, as consumers continue to purchase products *as if* unaware of their exploitative origins. They are of course only too aware and he argues that it is narcissism that more helpfully explains how the commodity fetish functions. The narcissist becomes the fetishist in an attempt to keep their 'dark side' from awareness. We find this analysis helpful, although still being left with the problem that the narcissistic act is essentially motivated by self-love, whereas the fetish operates both at an individual and interpersonal level. For example, the psychic tension surrounding the purchase of cheap clothing, known to have been produced in exploitative conditions, is contained by being widely socially acceptable. Yet, such would be the likely social rejection, it would take considerable internal resources (narcissism), for example, to purchase and wear real animal fur.

Nixon, Scullion and Hearn (2016) investigated the impact of marketised HE on reports of student satisfaction and also concluded that, through the lens of narcissism, it can be noted that the individual seeking gratification has had a negative effect on pedagogy and has served only to enhance the damage already inflicted by the neoliberal agenda. We accept that the focus on narcissism does offer an alternative to considering the fetish but as yet does not allow us to consider how each stage of the magic trick has an influence on teaching and learning in HE. We continue by taking a provocative stance as we argue that at a grand scale it is learning that has been fetishised by the introduction of the TEF: an example of a neoliberal accountancy commodity imbued with unrealistic powers that it is hoped will improve the process of teaching and therefore learning in HE.

### ***The TEF and learning as a fetish***

Our application of Marxian magic tricks and psychoanalytically informed readings of the fetish to higher education practice and policy are deliberately provocative and playful. We do not wish to engage in a solipsistic nostalgia that seeks to see the past (pre-neoliberal) as better; indeed, we acknowledge that education has always been disruptive (Bainbridge and West, 2012 and Britzman, 2003) with its own internal violence. Our task is first to expose the fetish as only then will it be possible to identify what has been killed and what has been replaced by the magic trick. In doing so, it may also be possible to think about what teaching and learning in HE might be as well as what it means to be excellent.

Criticisms of accountancy measures such as the TEF are not new. Biesta (2010), for example, questions the whole notion of ‘evidence-based practice’ and in particular how repeated conceptual errors relating to knowledge, efficacy and application continue to inform this flawed project. For many years, Power (1999) warned about the increase of an ‘audit culture’ that has led to a dominance of quantifiable metrics and how the escalated influence of metrics has been matched by an upturn of mistrust in experts and bureaucracy. Power also notes how principles of accountancy may be responsible for marginalizing difficult to measure processes and outcomes. Within the context of HE, Nixon et al. (2016) argue that the marketization of HE has led to reduced academic criticality, a focus on servicing the economy in the place of responding to social and developmental responsibilities, a reduced range of disciplinary knowledge alongside increasingly passive and instrumental learners. It could be argued that 20 years earlier, Readings (1996) provided a prophetic warning that such changes could occur in the contemporary university in his aptly titled book, ‘The University in Ruins’ where he considered the influence of neoliberal policies of ‘excellence’ and profit.

Within the context of the UK, the government has the implementation of the TEF in England as a central and defining piece among its many policy proposals to be found within the *Higher Education and Research Act* (Department for Education, 2017a). By the time of

the first full TEF took place (reported in 2017b) the metrics chosen were: teaching on my course, assessment and feedback, academic support (each collected from the National Student Survey) and non-continuation, employment or further study, highly skilled-employment or further study (each collected from the Higher Education Statistics Agency)

It should be noted that half of the metrics use highly unreliable student satisfaction data (Braga, Paccagnella and Pellizzari, 2014), while the other half are linked to rather obtuse data including the numbers of students on a programme and ‘suitably’ graduate level future employment. The later providing a brief insight to the limited scope of using such metrics; as an example managing a fast food chain outlet is deemed to be sufficiently ‘graduate’ level to have a positive impact on the TEF, whereas a graduate, even with an Early Years degree, working with young children will not be recorded as graduate level employment. Such a list and the associated anomalies represents the fetish running rampant in higher education where the exchange-value of student satisfaction, hours taught and numbers on a course become the focus and distract from the anxiety inherent within the complex use-value reality of teaching and learning. Thus, the magic trick is complete!

### **Death of learning**

The sub-title allows the reader to predict which direction our thinking is going and although no surprise at this stage of the paper we are going to argue that despite the continual reference to excellence and standards, New Public Management approaches such as the TEF, often achieve the opposite of what they set out to do. In the case of the TEF we aim to show that ‘excellent teaching’ does not lead to excellent learning in HE – infact it may have the effect of putting learning that is uniquely human to death (this is of course all part of the magic trick). There are questions to be asked about what it means for humans to learn and exhibit ‘excellence’. The neoliberal focus on competition is the driver for excellence but this is

within the context of excellence being measured according to pre-determined standards – for example the metrics within the TEF.

There is an assumption that such metrics do indeed represent what qualities are being valued, yet Bottery (2000) raises the difficult question as to which qualities should be valued and therefore guide education policy. He identifies seven versions of quality and discusses why and who should recommend a particular version. It would appear that of the seven possibilities ‘consumer quality’ drives current education policy and, without covering all six other versions, we can allude to wondering why ‘expert quality’, ‘traditional quality’ or even ‘civic quality’ have not been chosen to inform decision making. There is an additional irony related to the discussion of excellence in that the confirmation of being excellent can only be achieved by conforming to the metrics chosen for that particular reading of what qualities are to be deemed excellent. Taking the example above related to degree level qualified Early Years professionals, despite having excellent ‘civic qualities’ of caring for the young children of others, ‘expert qualities’ in child development and the ‘bureaucratic quality’ to manage this care, their low salary (consumer quality) is sufficient to have a negative impact on TEF metrics.

To be excellent within the neoliberal agenda is to conform and achieve high audit scores. Numerous authors have demonstrated the deleterious effects of such conformity hidden in the *turn* of excellence. For example, Bottery (2000) identifies with regret all that is lost from education by adopting singular dominant views of quality and Biesta (2010) exposes the ineffectiveness and damage caused in the continual search for metrics to measure educational success. Additionally, Butler and Spoelstra (2012) conclude that to be excellent requires Machiavellian game-playing, arguing that despite protestations, those who are deemed ‘excellent’ have simply become subservient to the process and values inherent within the metrics of accountability. More recently Butler and Spoelstra (2014) argue that game-

playing requires an epistemic re-shaping, where individual values need to be modified to match those of peer reviewers and potential auditors. The consequence of considering such a ‘re-shaping’ is evocatively described by Stephen Ball (2015 p. 258), who quotes Judith Butler as feeling “other to myself precisely at the place where I should expect to be myself”.

Ball’s experience identifies how neoliberal higher education structures and process act on the ‘out there’ as well as the ‘in here’. Correspondingly, if initially a little obtuse, Bruno Latour (1993) claimed that for the process of pasteurization to be effective, France had to become ‘pasteurised’. He argued that there were other possible means to protect public safety and provide safe milk but Pasteur’s ideas and technologies became widespread due to the manner in which Pasteur could galvanise the scientific, political, industrial and farming world. Put simply, without the widespread adoption of Pasteur’s methods pasteurization would not have worked – France had to become ‘pasteurised’. Equally, for the neoliberal accountancy technologies to work the metrics and accountancy of audit need to be accepted, even reluctantly, and acted on and this is where higher education now finds itself in relation to the TEF.

Just like Pasteur’s methods brought about the death of bacteria (good/bad) so to is the machinery of the ‘excellence’ agenda bringing about the death of learning in HE. We accept that humans learn in a wide variety of ways and acknowledge that simplistic behaviourist mechanisms do explain much of what we learn and that rote learning and memorization are necessary. Importantly, however, there is a distinctive quality which sets human learning apart. We shall discuss Biesta’s (2006) conception of how humans learn and the importance of responsibility later but recognise that there is a complexity to human learning, particularly in HE, that is under threat. Nixon et al. (2016) used a psychoanalytic lens to expose how the student response to a marketised HE is to activate the defense of narcissism and, in doing so, noted how student learning focuses on conservative and instrumental factors, a lack of critical

perspective and even an anti-scholarly sentiment. In particular, Nixon et al. (2016) theorised that the influence of the ‘student-consumer’ and focus on satisfaction has led to a move away from an understanding of human learning that offers challenge, struggle and a focus on intellectual development.

The impact is not only on the learner, after-all this paper is about the TEF, but the role of the teacher can also become diminished as a response to neoliberal obsessions with consumer quality and the need to keep the customer satisfied. Our own experience is reflected by Naidoo and Williams’ (2015) findings where teaching colleagues are reducing the range and depth of disciplinary knowledge and avoiding difficult content. The process of teaching has also responded to consumer notions of satisfaction and the proliferation of ‘easy access’ digital materials, virtual learning environments, flipped classrooms and blended learning. Paradoxically, often leading towards an avoidance of difficult knowledge and complex relational learning encounters (Bainbridge, 2014; Selwyn 2016). If the response to the TEF was to improve learning then there needs to be a more realistic and human understanding of what learning might actually be and more open discussion about what type of quality the TEF is promoting.

We are mindful to recall that magic tricks have three parts with the *prestige* resulting from the violence during the act of the *turn* on the original presentation of the *pledge*. If we are to free the magician’s bird and to subvert the power of the fetish, then our task is to expose the trickery of the *turn* between the *pledge* and the *prestige*. The Teaching Excellence Framework and its assumed positive impact on learning represents the fetishistic outcome of the *prestige* and consequently distracts from awareness the violent act of the magician. In our first example of the magician’s trick, the original bird has been killed and replaced by a second one, which now takes on the unrealistic properties and powers of a reified fantasy object. Within the neoliberal agenda for higher education the magic trick we expose, is one

where the bird that has been killed is the complex relationship between teacher, learner and what learning in higher education might actually be.

Marx's use of the example of a famous 'table turning' trick to describe the outcome of the fetish can be employed again in 2017 (at least in England), but on this occasion it is not tables that have been turned but instead the reputation of the teacher and learner. Collini (2016) highlights a 'curious inversion' with the teaching and learning relationship that is predicated on the student role shifting from 'producer' to 'consumer' (Neary and Winn, 2009). Typically, in the past, Collini argues that students were perceived as 'spongers' who inhabited a 'demonised' role, but now students have become consumers, with the associated rights and expectations, they are to be lauded, listened to and ultimately it is their views that will drive up standards. Meanwhile, it is the academic that has become the 'sponger' and who must now be kept more productive and offer value for money teaching (and research). Despite continual evidence (Braga, Paccagnella and Pellizzari, 2014) questioning the efficacy of students ability to judge their learning experience, it is this metric that has become the more powerful and represents the *turn* within the magic trick that kills the conditions for trust and respect in the relationship between teacher and learner and we would further contend the complex process of learning in higher education.

It is also important to note the role of the fetish to stimulate disavowal, now that the demonised student producer of the *pledge*, has been killed off in the neoliberal *turn* in favour of the re-presented *prestig(ious)* lauded student consumer. What has now emerged is a perverse irony where the less experienced is enabled to make decisions as to how the more experienced should carry out their professional role. This irregular situation has been sanctioned by legislation to improve learning but the paradox is that learning will also suffer a cruel fate in the magician's *turn*. The deception provided by the *prestige* of the student as consumer hides from awareness that learning is a complex process that requires individuals to

grapple with sustained difficult thinking, along with a delusional fantasy that ‘excellent teaching’ will unproblematically lead to ‘excellent learning’. Consequently, the impact of the TEF and the clamour for value for money is unlikely to enhance learning or the conception of the student as producer.

It is relevant to refer to Marx again: he argued that the commodity fetish has the effect of conflating use value for exchange value and this is also the case here. The use value of learning – the hard work, the effort and joy of academic labour (Winn, 2015) – has been replaced by an exchange value where the outcome elides the process. In a world of value for money, it is less likely to imagine satisfaction being found in slow, careful and deliberate study that which may, in turn, have very few links with potential future salary, retention rates or student satisfaction.

Perhaps the most palpable outcome of the magic embodied within the TEF is how the game-playing professional academic is put to death in the act of the *turn* between the *pledge* of an autonomous professional body and the *prestige* of the highly regulated work-force. If we move beyond the doubtful efficacy of the less experienced student as consumer providing judgments on experienced professional academic practice, we encounter the pathological possibility of the profession’s own narcissistic desires acting as the magician’s executioner (Cluley, 2014). It does not involve a great leap of imagination to envisage, just like with the extant Research Excellence Framework (REF) and National Student Survey (NSS), that substantial resources of professional time and money will be diverted towards ‘game-playing’ to maximise high metric scores (Petersen and Davies, 2010). Clarke (2010) also notes how, irrespective of local or national need, unpopular (less profitable) courses, modules and we would add, even staff, are axed to protect TEF scores. Although the implementation of the TEF is in very early stages, there is sufficient evidence from the REF and NSS to predict that the

TEF will continue its perverse destruction but this time of the very profession and process of learning it claims to support.

Decisions will no longer be pedagogic or academic but instead made to ensure an excellent student experience, or that effective management can be evidenced by paper trails (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Again, it is perverse that despite the intention of the TEF (and wider neoliberal practices) to improve the individual learning experience, it will hasten the death of individual professional decision-making and consequently serve to impose government approved practices. The disavowal is also clear in the confused thinking that an increasingly centralised data collection structure, paralleled with ‘approved’ observational criteria will empower local decisions and academic freedom. In this context there is a pretence of power and control, the intention behind the Higher Education and Research Act is deceptive as it claims to improve professionalism by imposing regulation. The TEF has its focus on the student experience, not the pedagogic encounter and it is noticeable how in its most recent iteration (Department for Education 2017b), now has the title ‘Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework’. Yet, conversely individuals and institutions will typically be caught up in the disavowal of apparently ‘knowing’ that the TEF is not an accurate reflection of ‘excellent’ teaching but nevertheless diverting significant resources to ensure the ‘game is played well’. Following Buler and Spoelstra (2014) and Clarke (2010), playing the game requires decisions to be made in relation to profit and not intellectual endeavour. While the intellectual enterprises that survive, do so because they have been neutered and are compliant to the expected metrics or peer review process. In their report on the second year of the TEF project the DfE (2017b) acknowledged that gaming takes place - but only in the context of student selection. Thus exposing the government’s assumption that, no matter how resolutely this may have been audited, student outcomes are more closely linked to the ability of the intake than the provision of ‘excellent quality teaching’. It is clear,

therefore, that the TEF can be viewed as an example of both a Marxian and Freudian fetish and consequently a cruel and deceptive magic trick that will kill learning relationships, learning and academic professionalism.

### **The bird that flies away: re-imaging the TEF**

How can we envision a hopeful way out of the violence of magic and the seduction of an audit obsessed neoliberal agenda and is it possible to re-conceptualise the processes of teaching and learning, in order to think about a different sort of excellent educational encounter? We want to argue therefore that what may seem unavoidable in the current political climate, that the magic trick will always be executed, that nevertheless this does not have to result in the death of the bird and, by association, the death of learning. We are trying to think about a less violent form of representation – a dialogic space - perhaps, what Gert Biesta (2006) calls ‘coming into presence’, where our response to the other does not involve the intention to dominate and control. Such a re-thinking of the trick would amount to the achievement of a new language to emancipate by exposing the mechanisms of trickery - violence and disavowal.

In order to do this work in relation to learning in higher education, we have deployed the concept of the fetish and argued that the fetish, like the neoliberal magic trick, is unavoidable, but that it can be re-claimed as a way out of violence, to be acknowledged and forgiven, rather than existing as a platform for violence. The bird can live, not in the wild, as it should, and certainly not in an equal presence with the magician, but it can live nonetheless. It is our aim to crack the metaphorical mirror that when gazed upon no longer tells the inquisitive that the neoliberal trick is ‘the fairest (sic) in the land’. Instead, it is an act of unnecessary and deceptive violence. We seek to expose table turning and confound the art of the magician by exposing the sleight of hand that *turns the pledge into prestige*.

We do not present the fetish with its inherent magic trickery merely to provoke a reaction but to bring it to awareness and to consider it possibly from a more realistic stance that recognises the complexity of the beguilingly messy relationship between education, teaching and learning. It is possible, we think, to work with the impulse of the fetish, if not ultimately escape it. And in order to do that, the fetish needs to be recognised for the sham that it is and thus dispel its magical illusion. The previous discussion on the TEF has gone some way towards this as it endeavored to expose how the *pledge, turn and prestige* is manifest within the TEF. In these final sections we wish to return to discuss the origins of the fetish and to use Cixous' observations on Freud's conception of the fetish, alongside Biesta's questioning of contemporary definitions of teaching and learning, to propose a formulation of the TEF that provides a more genuine representation of both teaching and learning.

Hélène Cixous writes against the fetish, which she broadens to an entire ontological position that she characterises and critiques as the 'masculine economy': she makes the link between the Freudian understanding of the development of masculine subjectivity, and its social and political manifestations, where:

... one becomes aware that the Empire of the Selfsame is erected from a fear that, in fact, is typically masculine: the fear of expropriation, of separation, of losing the attribute. In other words, the threat of castration has an impact. Thus, there is a relationship between the problematic of the not-selfsame, not-mine (hence of desire and the urgency of reappropriation) and the constitution of a subjectivity that experiences itself only when it makes the law, its strength, and its mastery felt, and it can all be understood on the basis of masculinity because this subjectivity is structured around a loss. Which is not the case with femininity." ( 1975/1986, p. 80)

So, for Cixous (and indeed Freud), the fetish arises out of a masculine drama in which the fear of loss gives rise to a desire to dominate and control the 'not selfsame, not mine' and to assert power by law. Thus, in the context of education, an 'Empire of the Selfsame is erected' (just as in Latour's 'Pasteurization of France') in the form of the TEF: this is where the fetish

has its origins within the performative culture of the masculine economy of audit and accountability.

Importantly, Cixous claims that ‘this is not the case with femininity’ and therefore leads us to consider what is the feminist alternative to the fetish and how might education be constructed within a performative feminised agenda: in particular, how does that allow us to think beyond fetishised representations of education? Cixous (1975/1986) states that the feminine does not seek to dominate and control, rather, it acknowledges that there is ‘an other’ and that the conquest of the ‘selfsame’ denies this and, we can argue, that the violence of audit is about the destruction of this ‘other’. The claims that Cixous makes are similar for those that Biesta (2006) makes for what he calls ‘coming to presence’ through education. In both arguments the process of recognising the other, without needing to dominate, incorporate or destroy it/her/him is the focus and the process of mature education.

Biesta argues against the (fetishised) language of learning - as constructivist notions of acquisition and adaptation: but he offers an alternative conception of education and views learning as a process of ‘coming to presence’ which:

. . . is about responding to what and who is other and different. Coming into presence is, in other words, thoroughly relational and intersubjective. This means that coming into presence requires careful attention to hear and see what and who is other and different. Coming into presence is as much about saying, doing, acting and responding, as it is about listening, hearing and seeing. In all cases, therefore, coming into presence is about being challenged by otherness and difference. (p. 62)

Biesta’s ideas of ‘coming to presence’ and his notion of being receptive to the world encountering us, as opposed to the self imposing its understanding/comprehension on the world. Then the self having to respond to what the world is asking, is what distinguishes the complexity of human learning and presents a helpful way of thinking beyond the fetish in education.

If learning is about intellectual engagement, interpretation and comprehension that results from an encounter with an external world, then the role of teaching is to interrupt the selfsame and provide opportunities for exposure to disruption, disjunction and difference. Psychoanalytic constructions of education (Britzman, 2003; Bainbridge and West, 2012 and Gaitanidis, 2012) highlight how learning disrupts, creating anxiety in both the teacher and learner, which, in turn, leads to learners often avoiding difficult learning and teachers likewise avoiding the difficulty of teaching. In addition to this, central to psychoanalytic assumptions is how anxiety can lead to childish and simplistic thinking where simple solutions are favoured above more complex ones. It follows, therefore, that exchange value confounds use value as learners, teachers and, of course, policy makers, unconsciously seek to avoid the hard work required for difficult and uncomfortable thinking. The result is an ‘Empire of the Selfsame’ where the fetish is free to deceive and distract and where perverse structures such as the TEF can flourish. Consequently, we can argue that a realistic conception of learning, as potentially uncomfortable and one that upsets the ‘selfsame’, is required.

Teaching and learning is complex and it is childish thinking to believe that metrics, competencies and standards will offer anything other than witnessing HE institutions becoming involved in ‘game playing’. Donald Winnicott (1993) reminds us that parents and teachers need only to be ‘good enough’: this is not to acquiesce to mediocrity but to take the adult stance and acknowledge the damaging internal fantasy of entirely good/bad parents or teachers, who can in reality only ever be ‘good-enough’. The fundamental nonsense of a framework for excellence is exposed in the word ‘enough’, for to be good enough requires a relationship that engages with the complexity of failures, successes, confusions and anxieties of individual learners. Indeed, for Winnicott the ‘perfect or excellent’ parent and teacher, one who does not fail, does not provide a suitable environment within which the infant can learn

about the realities of the external world. To be continually excellent is both fantasy and potentially pathological.

Frosh (1989) highlights this conundrum by suggesting a distinction between syntactic and semantic approaches to human functioning: syntax focusses on the rules, the grammar, whereas the semantic approach seeks to find meaning at the level of the particular individual. In the context of education Bainbridge and West (2012) discuss how a commodified audit approach to education is highly unlikely to provide insight into how a *particular* Jack or Jill did or did not learn in a *particular* context. The contention here is that the pursuit of a syntactic excellence framework will, by definition, reduce the prospect of engaging with the semantic particularities of teaching that can only ever be good-enough. But it is within the good enough encounter where meaningful human learning, and not the perverse pursuit of exchange-value commodities, actually takes place.

While we applaud the attempt to provide teaching in higher education with the same kudos as research, we are disappointed that nothing more hopeful and enlightening has been offered than the proposed TEF, riven with disabling unconscious masculine economy anxieties. The impact of audit cultures have been written about many times (for example Power, 1999, and in this paper) and it is not our intention to resurrect these somewhat stale arguments – clearly these have had little impact on policy makers and many leaders in higher education. Instead, we wish to conceive an excellence framework that responds to, and represents, the values that inform the reality of teaching and learning and not the fetishised product that is so dominately presented. The first playful step is to offer to change the title from a ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’, to the slightly tongue-in-cheek, ‘Teaching that is Good Enough Framework’ (TGEF). The fetish works on the idea of lack – lack of the idyll/phallus that was never there. A mature understanding of learning in higher education

necessarily involves the acceptance that it will always be imperfect, and therefore the pursuit and accounting of one particular variety of excellence is delusional.

If we are to reimagine a TEF that takes an adult stance and is prepared to deal with the complexity of teaching and learning then it must be prepared to move from a syntactic to a semantic stance. This is never easy for those who desire a quick to administer metric but the move is worth it as it will debunk the fetish and by exposing the magician's violence allow the birds to be free to fly again. Earlier we suggested that the trickery of the TEF will result in the death of the teaching and learning relationship, the process of learning and the professionalism of those who teach. As the impact of audit culture is already prevalent within HE, our proposal for a TGEF we hope will go some way towards resuscitating the already near death status of learning.

## **Resuscitation**

We return to the bird – this time a bird that escapes from the violent end visited on it by the magician and flies free. Re-thinking the bird in this way opens up a post-colonial representation of the fetish which is not dominated by instrumental and masculine rationality of Enlightenment thinking, perceiving the fetish as an inferior and underdeveloped form of 'primitive' superstition. Instead, apprehending the production and use of the fetish as a cultural practice which attempts, mimetically, to understand the objects of the world by ascribing magical powers to them. What we have attempted to do here is to offer a way out of the fetishisation of learning.

We are genuinely fearful that the anxiety provoked by the machinery of accountability has caused education professionals to inhabit what Klein (1931/1985) refers to as the paranoid-schizoid position. It is from this mindset that simplistic childish thinking dominates and the ability to maintain an adult perspective on complexity is diminished. We can argue

that the fetish has distracted pedagogues from engaging with difficult knowledge and instead narcissistic tendencies focus on an ‘X-Factor-esque’ desire to be liked and voted for. A new reimagined TGEF can compensate for this and breathe life back into professional decision making by valuing academic feedback alongside that of students and we would be bold enough to suggest that these professional views carry more weighting. We would also encourage the TGEF to report on the knowledge delivered by teachers and imagine that ‘quality’ can be linked to providing suitably challenging conceptual thinking.

It was noted earlier how the exchange value of learning has subsumed its use value and as a result the discomfort and challenge that human learning offers can now easily be avoided. This problem arises from the change in thinking from the perspective of student as producer to student as consumer. Education has become a commodity and consequently a fetish that distracts from the effort, the labour that is associated with learning. Our playful proposal is for a TGEF that avoids excessively rewarding ‘edutainment’ – we are not against fun and engaging learning activities but are cautious that these can seduce both the teacher and learner. Learning is challenging and unsettling and for many this is where the ‘fun’ in learning is positioned, but to free the bird, the confusions, frustrations and joys of learning need to return to the pedagogical lexicon. We imagine a TGEF that can be used to identify the positive aspect of challenging learning, including lecturers who create intellectual discomfort and an appreciation of the tenacity required to stay with difficult knowledge. In the context of Biesta’s ‘coming to presence’ we can see value in asking learners about their ‘response’ to teaching: maybe this is more pedagogically sound than plotting ‘learning gain’ as it requires a commitment to move beyond the ‘selfsame’.

We are highly sceptical of the short-term pursuit for gains in reputation in favour of the more difficult work required for more sustainable long-term quality. Simplistic metrics previously in use, such as the National Student Survey and University Student Surveys, have

already ‘turned the tables’ and students are now lauded and lecturers demonised with the ensuing possibility for good-enough teaching considerably diminished. If a TGEF is to consider semantics above syntax then a shift towards more qualitative methodologies is required and the necessity for vast amounts of quantitative data practically obsolete. Our suggestion is to encourage HE institutions to engage in case studies to collect descriptions of *particular* teaching and learning encounters. We do not seek to provide generalised ‘findings’ that can be applied across populations but rather to encourage discussions about androgogy or pedagogy, from which generalities may or may not emerge.

Finally, we acknowledge the sceptism that the act of identifying the fetish can have on altering the consumer behaviour of individuals (Cluley and Dunne, 2012). There are lessons to be learnt here from the clinical world of psychotherapy, including that lasting behavioural change is complex and this can take many years. Our intention is not that we offer a ‘cure’ and assume that the learning fetish will suddenly disappear in a flash of unexpected revelation - indeed we provide the possibility of the fetish being reimagined and not removed. Rather, our intention is to begin a dialogue where the fetish and its manifestations can be articulated. Psychoanalysis teaches us that learners hold on deeply to what they know for it is this, however uncomfortable, that provides the very basis of a sense of self. Learning is riven with anxiety as it must, by definition, disrupt whatever knowledge is already held as true. This experience can be painful and therefore often avoided resulting in defences such as repression, forgetting, dissociation and disavowal all being activated to protect the beleaguered ego. New knowledge can thus be traumatic and require much thinking/talking about and learners can remain ‘stuck’ with old knowledge and continue to repeat behaviours that they have been made aware are unhelpful.

The therapeutic space provides an environment for individuals to repeatedly approach new knowledge and over time, in a good enough relationship, go through the painful

intellectual labour of disregarding old ideas and embodying new ones. Although we do not see the process of writing this paper as therapeutic, there are still parallels. To rid the neoliberal influenced fetish of ‘excellent learning’ of its seductive ‘selfsame’ power, there needs to be two levels of action: in the first first, individuals must be made aware of, and begin to think about, the fetish. The second level is for dialogue to take place as the fetish can only have a hold if there are others to believe in it and socially construct its lie (Cohen, 2017). This paper contributes to the dialogue and the authors are under no illusion that it will or can suddenly bring down the edifice of neoliberal magic tricks. Our best offer is that we take heed of Biesta’s ‘grown-up’ (2017) understanding of learning, that readers consider what their own response to the fetish might be and maybe also consider Ball’s (2012) desire that our impact on learners should not be calculable but instead memorable.

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