

Rereading Lyotard: Knowledge, Commodification and Higher Education

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Abstract

Nearly two decades have passed since Jean Francois Lyotard first published *The postmodern condition*. Following the release of an English translation of the text in 1984, *The postmodern condition* has been widely cited, and now no major work on postmodernism is 'complete' without reference to it. This paper returns to Lyotard's concise account of the changing nature of knowledge in late capitalist societies, and reassesses his claims about performativity, commodification and the future of the university. An appraisal of the New Zealand policy scene suggests Lyotard was stunningly accurate in his predictions about many features of the changing higher educational landscape. While some commentators, following Lyotard, have announced the 'death of the professor' in computerised societies, others believe academics might play a vitally important role in postmodern universities. The paper provides an overview of this debate, and considers its relevance in the New Zealand context. The paper analyses the views of A.T. Nuyen -- a theorist who takes the latter position -- in the light of the New Zealand context, and assesses prospects for pedagogical resistance against the dominant metanarrative of our time.

It is difficult to avoid the term 'postmodernism' in the contemporary academic world. Postmodern ideas have surfaced in a remarkably diverse range of scholarly fields, including sociology, philosophy, anthropology, geography, women's studies, literary criticism, art, architecture, cultural studies, and education. Of the various authors frequently cited in articles and books addressing postmodern themes, Jean-Francois Lyotard is arguably one of the most important for educationists. This claim cannot be made lightly, given the company Lyotard often keeps in postmodern bibliographies: Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Bataille, Baudrillard, and Rorty, among others, also feature regularly. My assertion about Lyotard's educational significance rests, in large part, on a reading of his classic text *The postmodern condition* (1984), first published in 1979. Following the release of an English translation of the text in 1984, *The postmodern condition* has been widely cited, and now no major work on postmodernism is 'complete' without reference to it.

This paper returns to Lyotard's concise account of the changing nature of knowledge in late capitalist societies, and reconsiders some of his statements about performativity, commodification and the future of the university. An appraisal of the New Zealand policy scene suggests Lyotard was stunningly accurate in his predictions about many features of the changing higher education landscape. While some commentators, following Lyotard, have announced the 'death of the professor' in computerised societies, others believe academics have a vitally important role to play in postmodern universities. The paper analyses the views of A.T. Nuyen -- a theorist who takes the latter position -- in the light of the New Zealand context, and assesses prospects for pedagogical resistance against the dominant metanarrative of our time.

The Postmodern Condition

When *The postmodern condition* was published almost two decades ago it became, as Michael Peters (1995, p.xxiii) points out, 'an instant cause celebre'. Indeed, it can be likened -- in one sense, at least -- to Kant's famous discourse on ethics and reason, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*: both texts have exerted an influence seemingly quite out of proportion to their size (cf. Paton, 1948, p.7). Kant's *Groundwork* has, of course, stood the test of time as a philosophical work of enduring value; the fate of *The postmodern condition* over the next two centuries remains to be seen. It is undeniable, however, that in the space of less than 70 pages Lyotard captured much of what has subsequently come to be regarded as important in postmodern work. Given the focus of this paper, I shall concentrate on a number of key statements near the beginning and the end of the book. Collectively, these passages provide a summary of Lyotard's ideas on the commodification of knowledge, the logic of performativity, and the impact of computerisation on teaching and learning.

Following a brief Introduction -- where the often-quoted comment about the postmodern condition being defined by 'incredulity toward

metanarratives' is made (1984, p.xxiv) -- Lyotard offers a working hypothesis: 'that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age' (p.3). Observing that this trend has been under way since at the least the end of the 1950s, Lyotard goes on to predict that knowledge -- which has become the major force of production in recent decades -- will increasingly be translated into quantities of information, with a corresponding reorientation in the process of research. Lyotard notes that 'the miniaturisation and commercialisation of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited' (p.4). Knowledge in computerised societies is becoming 'exteriorised' from knowers. The old notion that knowledge and pedagogy are inextricably linked has been replaced by a new view of knowledge as a *commodity*:

Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its "use- value" (pp.4-5).

Lyotard continues:

Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major -- perhaps *the* major -- stake in the worldwide competition for power. It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor (p.5).

Indeed, with the rise of multinational corporations, the very idea of autonomous nation states begins to break down. The new technologies will hasten and reinforce this development. The State, Lyotard postulates, will come to be perceived as 'a factor of opacity and "noise"' (p.5) in the commercialisation of knowledge. The idea that 'learning falls within the purview of the State, as the mind or brain of society' will give way to the view that 'society exists and progresses only if the messages circulating within it are rich in information and easy to decode' (p.5). Lyotard envisages a shift in the whole system of organised learning:

It is not hard to visualize learning circulating along the same lines as money, instead of for its "educational" value or political (administrative, diplomatic, military) importance; the pertinent distinction would no longer be between knowledge and ignorance, but rather, as is the case with money, between "payment knowledge" and "investment knowledge" -- in other words, between units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework (the reconstitution of the work force, "survival") versus funds of knowledge dedicated to optimizing the performance of a project (p.6).

Lyotard argues that knowledge and power are 'two sides of the same question' (p.9). In the West, narrative knowledge has been subjugated by scientific knowledge. The latter is 'governed by the demand for legitimation' and, as a long history of imperialism from the dawn of Western civilisation demonstrates, cannot accept anything that fails to conform to the rules (the requirement for proof or argumentation) of its own language game (p.27). Narratives, by contrast, are legitimated by the simple fact that they 'do what they do' (p.23).

In the computer age, 'the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government' (p.9). The function of the state will change: machines will come to play an important role in regulatory and reproductive processes, and the power to make decisions will increasingly be determined by questions of access to information (p.14). Eventually, 'professors' (academics) will no longer be needed: much of the work they currently undertake can and will be taken over by computerised data network systems (p.53). Computerization 'could become the "dream" instrument for controlling and regulating the market system, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle'. This would involve the use of terror. Alternatively, computerisation could 'aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions'. Lyotard believes we should take the second of these two paths and provide free public access to data banks. This would respect both 'the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown' (p.67).

Neoliberalism and Educational Reform in New Zealand

In this section I comment on some of the features of educational reform in one country -- New Zealand -- which mirror, in chillingly close detail, the move toward the commodification of knowledge and learning signalled in *The postmodern condition*.

The broad features of the economic and social revolution in New Zealand are well known, and need to be recalled only briefly here. Once the 'welfare capital' of the world -- with a comprehensive state-funded system of health and education and a range of benefits for families, the elderly and the sick -- New Zealand has, since 1984, been the subject of a far-reaching 'neoliberal experiment' (Peters and Marshall, 1996). After years of interventionist policies under the Muldoon administration, the election of the fourth Labour government saw Roger Douglas appointed to the position of Minister of Finance and the beginnings of a programme of radical economic and social restructuring (Kelsey, 1995). Tariff barriers to trade were removed, subsidies to farmers were abolished, and state assets were sold. There were massive redundancies in some areas of the state sector. Among other vivid examples, the loss of thousands of jobs in the railways service and the closure of dozens of post offices are especially memorable. The aim was (ostensibly) to improve efficiency, encourage independence, and reduce state expenditure. With Treasury officials enjoying unprecedented influence, and with strong support from other government agencies -- particularly the State Services Commission (Dale and Jesson, 1992) -- and business elites, a strong push to remove the state from people's lives was made.

The boom years of the mid-1980s saw inner city landscapes transformed as new buildings popped up like mushrooms. Inflation was rampant, and speculative activity on the stock exchange reached almost frenzied levels. The stock market crash of 1987 saw 'paper' fortunes disappear, and the country gradually eased into a deep recession. This had little effect on the reform programme, and with the election of the National government in 1990 the privatisation process initiated by Labour was intensified. Benefits were slashed, 'user

pays' fees were introduced in hospitals and tertiary institutions, and further state assets were sold. A new employment environment -- built on the systematic exclusion of unions, the lowering of wages, and the concentration of power in the hands of employers -- was established with the passage of the Employment Contracts Bill into law. Unemployment increased dramatically, and of those who could find work, many were forced to accept part-time positions, poor employment conditions, and a lack of job security -- all of which was wrapped up in the language of 'flexibility' in the workplace, and given strong endorsement by the National government. The privatisation process has now, under a new National-New Zealand First coalition government, entered its final phase: with the restructuring of the 'core' public sector (almost) complete, education and health have become priority areas for further marketisation.

The marketisation of education, a trend consistent with Lyotard's analysis, has in New Zealand been built on a neoliberal political philosophy, at the heart of which is a view of human beings as rational, autonomous, utility-maximising individuals (Marshall, 1995). The public sphere has been transformed. In place of the old ideals of welfare, community and a sense of obligation toward others, the new rules are those of the market. State involvement in individual lives is, for the most part, seen as highly undesirable. (On the changing role of the state in New Zealand, see Boston, 1995; Boston *et al.*, 1991; Kelsey, 1993; Sharp, 1994.) A generous system of universal benefits, it is believed, is inefficient, inequitable, and likely to promote 'welfare dependency'. The state, for the most fervent supporters of neoliberal reform, has a legitimate role to play in ensuring the conditions for 'free' market activity are in place, but, save perhaps for also providing a police and/or defence force, there is little else for government to do. Others generally supportive of the move toward privatisation of public services see a continuing role for government in overseeing and regulating institutional activities. Either way, the legitimacy of the market as the ideal platform on which to base social life remains unquestioned.

The educational changes implied by this form of thinking have been clear for some years now (see, for example, Treasury, 1987; Crocombe, Enright and Porter, 1991), and have been introduced in successive stages. The trend to date has been to privatise educational processes, programmes and responsibilities while at the same time strengthening control and power at the centre. Teachers, Boards of Trustees and tertiary administrators have been held accountable for decisions relating to the day-to-day running of educational establishments, yet the parameters for undertaking these duties have been defined elsewhere. The market has been the seen as the ideal model on which to base educational arrangements. Competition between students, staff and institutions has been encouraged. Students have been redefined as 'consumers', and tertiary education institutions have become 'providers'. Bureaucrats now talk of 'inputs', 'outputs' and 'throughputs' in the education system. Any notion of educational processes serving a form of collective public good has all but disappeared; instead, participation in tertiary education is now regarded as a form of private investment. As such, the expectation is that students will pay a growing proportion of the costs associated with their chosen programmes of study (Peters, 1997a). The philosophy of 'user pays', routinely cited as a justification for charges in a whole range of public service areas, has become the order of the day in education. Education, in short, has become a commodity: something to be produced, packaged, sold, traded, outsourced, franchised, and consumed.

The rhetoric of 'choice' has permeated many official statements on education in recent years (Codd, 1993a, 1993b; Olssen, 1997). Students are regarded as roving, perpetually choosing, rationally autonomous consumers, always seeking out the best value for their educational dollar. Educational institutions, on the other hand, are forced to compete -- if they do not their viability is threatened -- with other 'providers', the imperative being to 'sell' themselves and their programmes effectively in order to keep enrolments and revenues at healthy levels. There has been a significant change in the teacher-student relation. This is now no longer seen as a pedagogical relationship but a contractual one (Codd, 1995). Students, in paying ever higher fees for the privilege of attending an educational institution, expect good value for their (private, self-interested) investment. When the services they 'purchase' do not measure up to expectations, 'providers' can -- as a recent case at Victoria University in Wellington demonstrated -- be threatened with legal action for breach of an implied contract. Tertiary institutions must, we are constantly reminded, be 'accountable' for what they do, and when they fail to 'deliver the goods', they should pay a (legal and/or financial) price for this. Faith in the authority, commitment and professionalism of institutions and the staff within them can no longer be taken for granted. In the current environment, a long tradition of university education is simply one more factor for students to take into account in attempting to maximise utility through their tertiary purchasing decisions.

The logic of performativity is writ large over the entire reform process. There has been a constant drive -- initiated from the centre and bolstered by influential business organisations (such as the New Zealand Business Roundtable and the Employers Federation) -- to make education more 'efficient', more closely tied to the 'needs' of industry and employers, and more 'business like' in its processes and practices. Gaining greater value from the educational dollar has been a key goal, but the battle has also been an ideological one (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994). Transforming educational institutions and organisations into corporate entities -- geared toward the ideal of making a profit or at least minimising losses and inefficiencies -- has been an important objective. Traditional forms of university governance are no longer seen as appropriate; the best model for optimum performance, it is believed, is a 'board of directors' system, with fewer people involved in key decisions and a smaller proportional representation from university staff.

There is, business leaders and Treasury bureaucrats claim, considerable 'wastage' in the education system. Devoting taxpayer dollars to courses that lead nowhere (in the business sense), attract few students, and pursue esoteric or trendy lines of theoretical inquiry is seen by some as a pointless exercise to be resisted (see, for example, Kerr, 1997). The solution, some assert, is to promote intense competition and maximise the choices available to consumers (students, their parents and employers), while progressively withdrawing state support (cf. Myers, 1993). This 'consumer-driven' system avoids the problem of 'provider capture' (Treasury, 1984) -- a situation where institutions have excessive control over the content, processes and valorisation of educational programmes -- and allows all committed, entrepreneurial players in the tertiary marketplace to flourish. Regular 'performance reviews' of all kinds -- for individuals, departments, programmes, and entire institutions -- have been seen as necessary to ensure these efficiency objectives are being met. Various 'performance indicators', most inspired by a form of technocratic managerialism, have been developed to (ostensibly) give clear evidence of success or failure in the discharging of contractual obligations.

As an extension of the same logic, a complex system for ensuring efficient trading in information about educational qualifications has been developed. This has been underpinned by a strong push to break down divisions between 'academic' and 'vocational' learning (compare, Hood, 1995; Barker, 1995). The development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) under the auspices of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has been a crucial, and often underestimated, step in the standardisation of trading within the educational marketplace. In building a system for exchanging information about qualifications and assessment through unit standards -- the 'building blocks' of the NQF to use the NZQA's own words -- a decisive shift away from the knowledge-based, institutionally-generated standards of old has been made. The transformation has proceeded hand-in-hand with changes elsewhere in the education system. *The New Zealand curriculum framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993), for example, is lacking in substantive discussion of knowledge and understanding but replete with talk of skills and information (Marshall, 1995). The context for this shift in focus is the language of 'enterprise culture' and 'international competitiveness', neatly encapsulated in Maris O'Rourke's opening comments in the *Framework* (O'Rourke, 1993) but elaborated and extended in numerous other policy statements issued in the early-to-mid 1990s. The NZQA has become a substantial bureaucratic body in an otherwise 'hollowed out' (Peters, 1997b) educational world, and the development, approval, assessment, and auditing of unit standards -- now numbering into the thousands -- has become a cumbersome and time-consuming task. A system based on unit standards allows educational 'products' -- the qualifications students acquire in 'purchasing' degrees and other programmes from competing 'providers' -- to be packaged, moved, compared and traded with ease.

It is important to acknowledge some of the positive features of the move toward a 'seamless', standards-based system. The NZQA reforms have allowed greater flexibility in the accumulation of qualifications -- an advantage for many adults seeking to return to tertiary education while maintaining other commitments (e.g. to their families) -- and have recognised, at least in principle, the value of prior learning. Students excluded from a programme of study in one institution are more likely in the current tertiary environment to find opportunities for gaining certificates, diplomas or degrees elsewhere than they may have been in the past. Moreover, the NZQA has, following extensive criticism from the universities and other tertiary sector groups, recently given ground on a number of crucial issues. (For critical analyses of the NZQA policy reforms, see New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee, 1994; Fitzsimons, 1995; Roberts, 1996, 1997a; Codd, 1995, 1996, 1997; Elley, 1996; Hall, 1995a, 1995b.) 'Excellence' as well as 'competence' now seems to be permissible; thus, external graded examinations will happily coexist with standards-based systems of assessment. The universities have been granted some (continuing) control over the maintenance of standards for degrees. And the battle to make unit standards the only basis on which educational performance is measured has been given away. In tandem with these concessions, however, the Ministry of Education has (in the green paper released earlier this year) reasserted the need for some form of standardisation -- a kind of '*common currency*' to use their phrase -- and placed fresh emphasis on the importance of *portability* in the qualifications arena (Ministry of Education, 1997a). There is also talk of 'databases' of credit information being built up, giving early warning, perhaps, of an attempt to make better use of the new technologies in monitoring educational activity (see further, Fitzsimons, 1996; Roberts, 1997b).

The tertiary review green paper (Ministry of Education, 1997b) has very little to say about information technologies, but the just-released green paper on teacher education (Ministry of Education, 1997c) places this issue squarely on the agenda. It is as if the Ministry has suddenly been roused from a sort of pre-cyberspatial slumber, with the enormous potential in the new technologies for saving money and meeting neoliberal policy objectives coming into clear focus at last. The possibilities for a convergence of 'virtual' technologies with neoliberal tertiary reform have yet to be adequately theorised in this country, but the money-saving potential in 'thin', 'for-profit' universities on the Internet (Luke, 1996, 1997) is surely not going to escape the attention of an administration obsessed with fiscal matters (above all other considerations) for long. The notorious 'leaked' version of the tertiary review green paper (Ministry of Education, 1997d) is, it might be postulated, driven by similar motives and ideological assumptions as the University of Phoenix's Online Campus. Indeed, there are some striking similarities:

Responding to the life-long learning market of nontraditional students and aiming to control costs, the University of Phoenix has forsaken all Mode 1 [culturally concentrated] knowledge system obligations; it has a narrow practical curriculum, nondisciplinary structure, no library resources, no research commitments, a flat, small central administration, and only part-time semi-professional faculty. Moreover, it runs on a for-profit basis; market performance, not peer review, valorizes its products (Luke, 1997, p.21).

In short, there is much in the history of educational reform in New Zealand over the past 13 years that bears an uncanny resemblance to the scenario described so vividly by Lyotard nearly two decades ago. Several phases in the commodification of knowledge can be identified: the development of standardised units for trading qualifications (and parts of qualifications); the concentration on skills and information in curriculum policy; and, most importantly, the redefinition of the concept of 'education' itself. Universities, along with all other tertiary institutions, are now expected to measure up to the new imperatives of performativity, and ongoing state support for programmes at odds with this logic cannot be guaranteed. Faith in the metanarratives of days gone by -- and in particular support for a variant of democratic socialism inaugurated by the first Labour government's extensive welfare programme more than half a century ago -- has been systematically undermined, only to be replaced, it must be added, by a new grand narrative: market liberalism. If the leaked version of the tertiary review green paper becomes cemented in policy and practice -- and there is nothing, on my reading, in the 'official' version to prevent this happening -- the last steps in a comprehensive attempt to build a marketised, consumer-driven system of education will be put in place.

Some changes to tertiary education in New Zealand were (and are) necessary. It was not difficult, fifteen years ago, to identify a number of potentially worrying trends at work. There was sometimes an excessive overlap between different programmes of study, uneven attention to (sometimes outright disregard for) teaching quality, a proliferation in the number of courses, an unhealthy conservatism in peer review processes, heavy bureaucratic barriers to change, and inadequate transparency and consistency in promotion and appointment procedures. It would be unwise to deny that certain inefficiencies existed the old system. Ironically, however, the neoliberal reforms have *exacerbated* rather than solved many of these weaknesses. The emphasis on performativity has contributed to a sharp increase in administrative work -- with endless forms to be filled in, and numerous new organisational tasks to be completed -- for most

academics. Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness have become a routine feature of academic life, but these have been heavily criticised. At the University of Auckland, the widespread and frequent use of standardised forms is now not recommended. Advancement through the ranks of the academic ladder has become a slower, less consistent, more difficult process -- particularly for Lecturers seeking promotion to Senior Lecturer status. There are now more courses and more organisations offering programmes of higher education than ever before in New Zealand. If unnecessary duplication of course content across institutions was observable in the past, this is now a problem of far greater proportions. This point finds perhaps its most dramatic illustration in teacher education programmes, with a plethora of degrees, certificates and diplomas currently available at universities, polytechnics, teachers colleges, and private training establishments.

In one sense, the full impact of computerisation has yet to be felt in the tertiary sector: academics have not yet been replaced (at least not in large numbers) by machines. Given what we know to be possible (in terms of processing power and technical sophistication) there is at present only rather limited use of the sort of data exchange systems envisaged by Lyotard. The emergence of the Internet is, to be sure, a development prefigured in Lyotard's analysis, but politicians and bureaucrats are only just beginning to see its potential in deepening -- perhaps completing -- the neoliberal agenda. Once the possibilities for a consumer-driven system of 'virtual' tertiary education, with minimal state funding but continuing governmental and/or corporate control over participants, become apparent, the future for academics -- in New Zealand and elsewhere -- could look very bleak indeed. Alternatively, the Internet could become highly significant in *resisting* neoliberal reforms. The Internet, as a multilayered, constantly changing, infinitely expandable and adaptable system, is often conceived as a largely anarchic communicative network. Rules and regulations appear from time to time within particular organisations on the web, and a form of self-regulation exists when the need to observe 'netiquette' is invoked, but much of the communicative and creative activity on the Internet has a spontaneous character, is anti-establishment and anti-bureaucratic in ethos, and is free from government or commercial interference. Moves to introduce state censorship of web materials have been opposed -- vigorously -- by many members of the international Internet community. 'Wired' academics might collectively constitute a formidable force against standardisation and the external regulation of minds and bodies. But will academics still *exist* as a professional class in the next century? The next section addresses this issue in relation to Lyotard's provocative claim about the impending demise of the professoriate.

The Role of Academics in Computerised Societies

While *The postmodern condition* raises many issues of educational significance, Lyotard's proposition that computerisation could signal the 'death of the professor' is obviously of special interest to academics. The threat to what some see as a livelihood, others a vocation (for most it is probably both), is bound to stimulate debate. Lyotard's own words should be conveyed here:

[T]he process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, nor more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games (1984, p.53).

Some believe Lyotard is astray in this prediction. Nuyen (1995), for example, drawing on the work of Rorty (1990, 1991), attempts to turn Lyotard's argument on its head. He maintains that the predominance of grand narratives diminishes the role of the professor, whereas their demise enhances the need for people (including professors) who can promote *understanding* over mere information retrieval. This is because

[a] grand narrative is meant to provide the grounding for, and thereby legitimate, other discourses. It does not allow for the questioning of its role and its nature, for to do so is to engage in another narrative. Thus, a grand narrative requires imposition and demands obedience, leaving no room for teaching and learning (p.49).

Nuyen points out that computers and other machines cannot ask *why* something should be this way or that; nor can they inspire imagination in students. In the postmodern university, Nuyen argues, we need a new kind of professor: one who can

...think up new viewpoints, who can construct alternative intellectual worlds, who can transfigure tradition with "original and utopian" fantasies, like those of "Plato's and St. Paul's", who are "world-disclosing" thinkers rather than "problem-solving" thinkers (p.55).

Nuyen prefaces his conclusions with a series of claims about narratives, understanding and information. He argues that Lyotard's predictions about the death of the professor are built on two premises: (i) that the role of the professor is to educate students in the understanding of narratives, and (ii) that narratives have zero performativity in proving scientific claims. Against Lyotard, Nuyen maintains that the fascination many people have in narratives -- in stories about 'great thinkers', for example -- is, when combined with increases in leisure time, likely to create further demand for people (professors) who can teach others about these narratives. The demand for learning about narratives is, according to Nuyen, unlikely to be affected by the performativity criterion because it is not led by the market (p.47). Moreover, if Lyotard is right about delegitimation, performativity and the collapse of grand narratives, professors (rather than computer programmers or technocrats) will be needed to spread the word about this. Nuyen suggests that Lyotard's target is a particular *kind* of professor: it is the Hegelian academic, the

guardian of Truth, the one who knows about the Absolute and who can *profess* about the system that leads to it, that is, one who can tell us with absolute authority that such-and-such is legitimate knowledge and so-and-so is not (p.49).

The appropriate role for the professor, Nuyen believes, is not to train students in routine skills, but to set examples -- to inspire, excite, and encourage others to new heights of creativity and imagination.

While (many) aspects of Nuyen's argument have considerable appeal for me, I want to begin by problematising some of the assumptions in his analysis. First, it seems to me that his claim about the fascination with narratives does not deal adequately with the question of how dispositions and choices come to be formed. The desire to study narratives could, given the right combination of social and ideological circumstances, disappear or be reshaped along lines conducive to the interests of, say, corporate giants. The history of capitalism has demonstrated that if there are dollars to be made from selling the 'products' of culture, great effort will be expended in fashioning tastes and attitudes to best serve the profit-making imperative. The interests people have in great stories (and stories of greatness) are not merely intrinsic to those individuals, and are certainly not 'natural' for all human beings. Rather, our conceptions of what might be worth studying or investigating are conditioned by the complex web of experiences and relations -- in the realms of politics, culture, the family, education, etc. -- we encounter and develop in our daily activities. A longing for narratives only creates jobs for academics if that desire is nurtured -- in a manner compatible with further stimulation by those who have already undertaken a particular approach to understanding narratives.

Second, there is nothing to stop technocrats and computer specialists from spreading a wide variety of messages -- including some relevant to discourses on delegitimation, the collapse of grand narratives, and so on. Lyotard happens to have advanced a position on these matters, as have other professors. But messages about the postmodern condition might be conveyed by any number of different individuals and groups -- and indeed by institutional structures, practices and processes, or by machines. The manner through which the message is conveyed in such cases may differ from that employed by a philosopher, but these alternative modes of transmitting ideas may -- if Lyotard is correct -- be more in keeping with our (postmodern) times. If at this moment in our history relentless consumption provides the dominant motive behind human activity, ideas generated in an 'easy to consume' form are likely to be more palatable. Regrettably, perhaps, the utterances of 20th century philosophers and others in academic positions have only infrequently been given serious consideration by many beyond the confines of the university. There are, of course, some important exceptions here -- ranging from Jean Paul Sartre to Allan Bloom -- but by comparison with television personalities, popular music heroes and newspaper commentators, academics have exerted relatively little influence in shaping (and challenging) public opinion. There are few readily discernible signs that the professoriate will be granted greater respect, or listened to more attentively, as we move into the new millennium. The need for professors as people who will explain the postmodern condition is thus, in the eyes of many, highly questionable.

Some would even question the need for any form of explanation: postmodern narratives, as Lyotard himself argues, legitimate themselves by doing what they do. But if knowledge of postmodernism, or anything else, is required, the logic of the system -- of the postmodern condition we find ourselves in as we try to address these problems -- would suggest it will be sought not with criteria of truth or academic authority in mind but rather with a view to maximising efficiency. Information (and it will be 'information' rather than knowledge) should, in other words, be gathered quickly, effortlessly and at the lowest cost possible. Some of us *want* to say professors will be needed to 'do the explaining' because we value traditions of scholarship, academic rigour, and face-to-face teaching. But this view is not shared by all. A clean, 'neatly packaged' answer to difficult questions is, for many, preferable to the complicated systems of argument and counter-argument typical of theoretical discourses in the university.

Like Nuyen, I believe making students aware of alternative ways of understanding (and living in) the world is of the utmost importance. This, for me, is one the key features of a good university education (see further, Roberts, 1996b, 1997c). An appropriately self-critical and open-minded attitude is essential, however, if academics are to perform this role with distinction. Part of the problem lies in the politics of selecting 'alternatives'. In this respect, the arguments of J.M. Fritzman (1995) are helpful. Writing in the same volume as Nuyen, Fritzman draws our attention to a key difference between Rorty and Lyotard:

Rorty believes that all disputes either are litigations or can be transformed into such. In contrast to Rorty, Lyotard argues that there are disputes that cannot be regulated. Such disputes are differends rather than litigations. Further, not all differends can be transformed into litigations. To attempt to adjudicate a differend as though it were a litigation necessarily wrongs at least one of the parties (p.66).

Lyotard's notion of the differend is succinctly summarised in the opening comments of his book of the same name. A differend, as distinct from a litigation, is 'a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable in both arguments' (Lyotard, 1988, p.xi). Conflicts -- differends -- are inevitable, but applying a single rule of judgement to settle a differend always damages at least one of the parties. This, for Lyotard, means politics should be concerned not with pursuit of the good but rather with minimising damage through preferring the lesser evil. A politics of the lesser evil attempts to 'leave open as wide a set of political options as possible' (Fritzman, 1995, p.68).

Fritzman finds Rorty's pluralism wanting. In response to Rorty's call for universities to 'take in representatives of every conceivable movement -- deconstructionists, Marxists, Habermasians, Catholics, Straussians' (cited Fritzman, 1995, p.70), Fritzman reminds us that many movements not currently 'conceivable' -- that is, those positions not recognised as either legitimate or minority views -- tend to be excluded. Carol Nicholson's (1989, p.204) argument that 'no serious voice' should be left out of the 'great conversation that shapes our curriculum and civilization' is, on Fritzman's view, similarly suspect: 'persons left out of conversations are always said to be insufficiently *serious* by those who would exclude them' (1995, p.70). Lyotard, by contrast, 'would recognise that besides attempting to persuade professors and administrators to recognise positions, frequently there are other options to be employed in obtaining a hearing for unpopular opinions and gaining legitimation'. 'It is', Fritzman says, 'the role of the imagination to create and discover these options'. The options might include:

....creating interdisciplinary academic journals; founding alternative educational institutes; writing letters of protest to trustees, legislators, state and national accreditation boards, and newspapers; occupying the administration building; seizing the library; and pseudonymously submitting papers to reputable journals (p.71).

Fritzman summarizes some of the pedagogical implications of Lyotard's position thus:

[E]ducation should encourage students to develop new ideas and to challenge critically what passes as common knowledge and accepted wisdom. In addition, education should teach students to be sensitive to the inevitable presence of differends (p.69).

This might involve demonstrating incommensurability in beliefs concerning the meanings of 'citizen' and 'subversive' through examples from current events; allowing students to encounter new forms of literature, music, painting and philosophy, and teaching about historical and cultural differences. Students should be encouraged to believe that all concepts -- including 'critical thinking', 'teaching', and 'learning' -- can be questioned and redefined (pp.69-70).

While Fritzman's suggestions for pedagogical activity have their limitations, the strength of his approach lies in the promotion of a respect for, and willingness to investigate and live with, uncertainty (as well as differends). This idea figures prominently in the work of a number of post-structuralist thinkers. Lyotard himself, in *The differend*, argues that the philosopher is not certain of what he or she wants or knows and values reflective 'ignorance' as a form of resistance against the 'accountable or countable use of time' (1988, p.xvi). This is an extension of his famous remarks in the Introduction to *The postmodern condition*. Stressing that he is a philosopher and not an expert, Lyotard adds: '[t]he latter knows what he knows and what he does not know[;] the former does not' (1984, p.xxv). Derrida advances a not dissimilar view: 'A philosopher is always someone for whom philosophy is not given, someone who in essence must question him or herself about the essence and destination of philosophy' (1994, p.3). Nietzsche, the thinker to whom all post-structuralist are indebted, has this to say: 'What a philosopher is, is hard to learn, because it cannot be taught: one has to "know" it from experience -- or one ought to be sufficiently proud *not* to know it' (1990, p.144). These comments all refer to a particular kind of thinker, who may or may not be a professor: this is the figure of the philosopher. Perhaps, though, there is a point of significance here for the debate over the future of the university and of academics in particular. In my view, assisting the development of an attitude of constructive, investigative, curious uncertainty is one of the most important roles academics might play in postmodern universities. Acquiring an appreciation for uncertainty demands that the world be rendered problematic, that nothing be beyond questioning, that 'what we have now' be contrasted with that which was or might be.

It does not follow that if some views may be excluded from the range of alternatives, none ought to be considered. The reasons behind an act of exclusion may vary widely and could include our ignorance, lack of knowledge, prejudices, history and experiences, or simply lack of time. To put nothing on the table does as little good as telling students there is only one way to view the world: this simply allows the dominant discourses of the day to prevail. The New Zealand context provides an especially interesting case study here. It is precisely because students in New Zealand *have*, in effect, been told there is only one real (or true or viable or sensible) path to follow that alternatives are needed. Market liberalism has become *the* metanarrative of our time. For the powerful promoters of this creed, there are no alternatives (see, for example, Myers, 1996). All problems -- whether economic, cultural, political, or personal in nature -- are addressed through neoliberal lenses.

A classic example of a differend has emerged. On matters of tertiary education, the gulf between those who play this language game -- subscribe to the grand narrative of market liberalism -- and those who wish to defend almost any other position on the purpose and character of a university is enormous. There is no rule that might be found to adjudicate between the parties involved in this dispute without one side being wronged, but to date the battle has been overwhelmingly one-sided. The litigating activities of politicians, bureaucrats and business elites have ensured that differends are hardly ever acknowledged, and questions about 'lesser evils' seldom seriously considered. Igniting even a small spark of uncertainty about the direction of the reform process by encouraging students to question -- to analyse, to criticise, to wonder, to become aware of alternatives -- would be a significant achievement in the contemporary New Zealand climate. There is a need for academics to tell other stories about New Zealand -- our histories and contrasting contemporary experiences -- but the creation and continuation of opportunities for maintaining this role cannot be taken for granted. The struggle to be heard against the dominant voices of the day will, as always, be agonisingly difficult, time-consuming, and ongoing.

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Higher education, particularly at doctoral level, still teaches the latter along the lines of something like an older apprenticeship model (e.g. between doctoral student and supervisor), although this is being gradually replaced with skills training that seek to transmit the competency of know-how precisely as the content of learning (something known).¹ Near the beginning of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard lays out what the dominance of new forms of technology upon knowledge entails: We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with regard to the "knower," at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process.

Olssen, M., & Peters, M.A. (2005) Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313-345. doi: 10.1080/02680930500108718. Louv, R. (2005).² Rereading Lyotard: Knowledge, commodification and higher education. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*. ISSN: 1198 3655.

Keywords: Higher education, commodification of knowledge, world-class university, university, universities ranking. 1. Introduction. At the end of the XX century, when Russia refused from further formation of socialist reality and.Â Postmodern Condition, Lyotard referred to the changes he had observed under the conditions surrounding. the production of knowledge in the following way: Â«The relationship of the suppliers and users of. knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the. form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they. produce and consume â€“ that is, the form of valueÂ» (Lyotard, 1991).