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Book Review: The University in Dissent

Mark Carver
University of Cumbria

The University in Dissent, by Gary Rolfe, London, Routledge and the Society for Research into Higher Education, 2013, 168pp, £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 0415681154.

Space for thought in our academic practice, even within our research, is at risk of being crowded out by a notion of quality control. With the marketisation of higher education a given, it can often feel that enjoying the time to really engage with a book, or to read outside our subject, is a luxury, and something increasingly done in our own time.

Readers sympathetic to such a view may be drawn, as I was, by the title of Gary Rolfe's *The University in Dissent*. Fluently written and passionate (yet still short of polemic and meticulously academic), it is a refreshing account of how an academic can still enjoy their day to day 'job' even while yearning for the 'glory days' of Wittgenstein teaching his Cambridge students from a deckchair. Rolfe's text is both witty and intellectual in exploring the problems faced by staff in the 'University of Excellence', and will make pleasing reading to anyone frustrated with managerialism in their department.

What Rolfe offers, however, goes beyond a philosophical manifesto or venting of frustrations. Drawing on Readings' (1996) influential text, *The University in Ruins,* it offers a way of 'dwelling in the ruins', and pursuing scholarly goals alongside other duties. It may ultimately seek to build a more ambitious community of dissenters, but it also offers immediate guidance to the frustrated academic and reminds those frustrated by 'the university' that *we are the university*.
Rolfe's background is in nurse education, so his treatment of the term 'excellence' will be familiar to other practitioners in professional education. Certainly in teacher education, 'excellence' has come to be as hackneyed a phrase as "outstanding". In the corporate university, excellence becomes 'a quantity rather than a quality"'(Rolfe, 2013: 9). Moreover, this product is evaluated by its consistency and reliability, even if it is consistently and reliably mediocre. Readings related this to an attitude where scholarly thought was 'balance sheet...waste' (Readings, 1996: 175), but Rolfe's argument goes further - scholarly thought is being unfairly treated as if it actively undermines what the modern university sees as productivity.

How, then, can scholarly thought survive in the modern university? Rolfe's answer is to 'dwell in the ruins' (Rolfe, 2013:21): to become more focused on continuing debates than resolving them, sacrificing some of our scholarly output for more thinking time. Rather than seeking to recapture the glory days, finding time to be philosophical in our academic practice is about recognising this value ourselves even if the balance sheet disagrees. In research, for example, we might accept that publishing our papers might take longer if we are to engage with theory rather than simply report our findings. Where the institution does not reward such a distinction, it is important that the individual is still able to see the benefits of such careful work, and Rolfe's text provides a sound theoretical base to help with this.

Crucially, Rolfe considers the idea of 'scholarliness' across all academic practice, so that being scholarly in our teaching likewise includes defending those practices we value, even in the face of

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quality control. In student assessment, for example, he argues that we should embrace the complexity and tacit nature of our professional judgement, that using marking grids forms a 'simulated judgement' (p.93) more focussed on satisfying quality control than student learning. He directly confronts a culture in which experts are compelled to work 'like novices' for the sake of consistency (p.94).

As practitioners, Rolfe's text challenges us to consider how far we are willing to sacrifice pleasing our managers to bring thought back into our scholarly activities - but perhaps a bolder question is considering how much we have strategically traded our time for thought. As a reader, I would have hoped for some reflection of how Rolfe's own students respond to his ideas. He charmingly wonders how Wittgenstein's students might have evaluated him in a student satisfaction survey, so it seems a shame that Rolfe does not draw on his own personal experience of being evaluated in this way and how he is able to usefully reflect on such feedback.

Whilst Readings and Rolfe both concede that the golden age of universities is behind us - that the university is indeed 'in ruins' - Rolfe points out that dwelling in those ruins need not be seen as a passive or subversive activity. Rather, dwelling is growing and cultivating in preparation for building. This point is made rather overly-complex by drawing on Heidegger, but it is nevertheless an important distinction. Finding more time for thought, for advancing our own learning, for 'unproductive' activity, for occasionally sticking with our beliefs, is not just about bringing some scholarliness back into our lives - it is forming green shoots within the corporate university: overgrowing the ruins, preserving endangered species. In my own research area of teacher education, an increasingly narrow conception of teacher training suggests that one day the corporate university might be grateful for those green shoots as it tries to rebuild scholarly thought from the ruins. At the very least, Rolfe's text may in time become a seminal text in the history of higher education, and something future academics find buried in the ruins.

References
Readings, B. (1996) *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Rolfe, G. (2013) *The University in Dissent: Scholarship in the Corporate University*. London: Routledge.