

Classtrophobia:
The Student as Troll in Student Course Evaluations
(An A/r/tographical Video Rendering)

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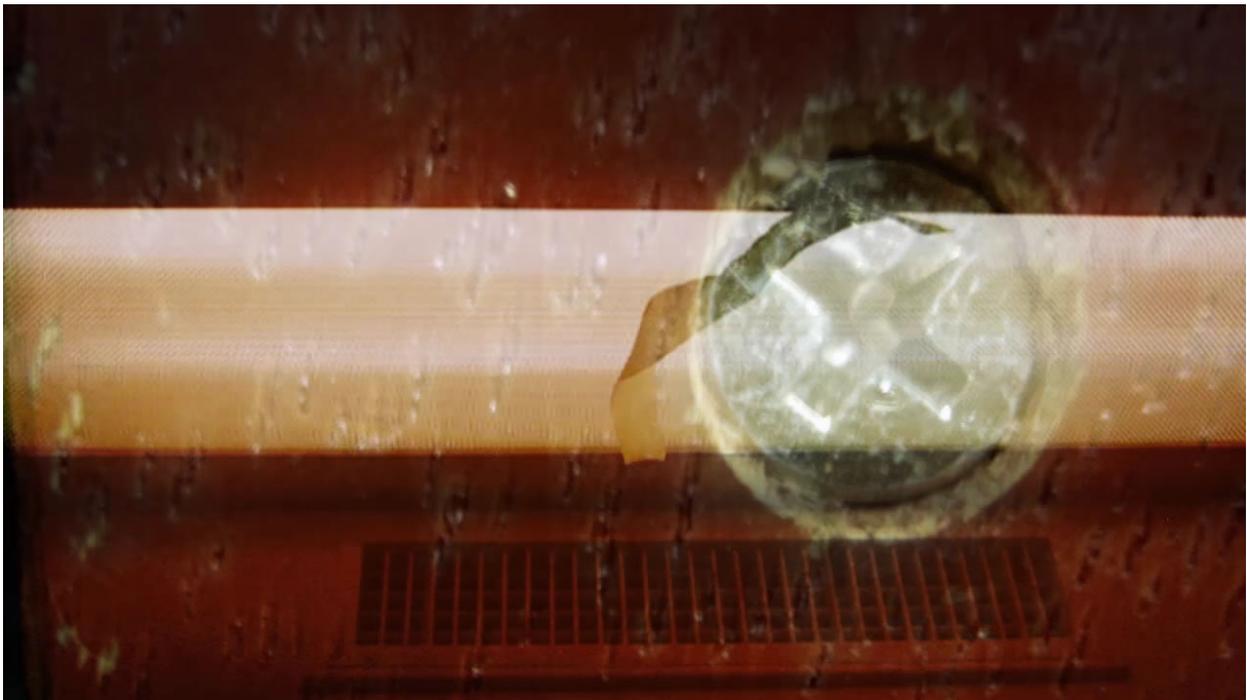


Figure 1. “Classtrophobia Still – Studio – Screwed in the Red”

RECEIVING ONE’S LATEST ROUND OF STUDENT EVALUATIONS is a scenario perhaps familiar to many academics. Here is Weir’s story:

Upon opening the evaluations I was crushed by the negative review. What did I do that made that student so bitter? . . . Being a newbie, I also immediately thought that the only evaluator who got it right was the complainer and I had merely duped the other students. Inevitably, I would be exposed as a fraud and barred from college teaching – in short, I panicked. (2011, p. 29)

In most universities, variations of this experience occur upon the release of the bi- or tri-annual student evaluations of teaching, the de facto measure of “effective teaching” for many purposes, including faculty promotions. In this paper we seek to render our experience through a lived aesthetic inquiry as a way to capture moments that resonate with readers’ (academics’) sense of lived life.

As institutions of higher learning, it is interesting that such student surveys have become the de facto means of evaluation. Stark and Freishtat (2013a) suggest that the primary reason this has occurred is their ease of use: “Students fill out forms. It takes about 10 minutes... averages of student ratings have an air of objectivity... and comparing the average rating of any instructor to the average for her department as a whole is simple” (n.p.). The consequences of this simple procedure are, however, very complex and affect issues such as student satisfaction, student success and retention, student learning (Rowan, Bigum, & Larkin, 2017), and quality teaching and the academic trajectories of university staff. These evaluations raise “serious challenges for contemporary academics who are attempting to respond to student feedback about what it means to be a ‘good’ academic in the 21st century” (Rowan, 2013, p. 133).

Our response to the use of Student Evaluations of Course (SEC) to evaluate our teaching is to: a) frame the use of SEC in the available research literature; b) render the lived experience of the SEC scores on the lead author in a video work, *Classstrophobia*; and c) inquire into the creation of the video work as a response to what it means to be an academic. For the purposes of this article, the term “course” refers to one unit of study within an entire program and SEC scores are equivalent to teaching evaluation measures used at most other universities.

Classstrophobia’s Trigger: The Current State of the University

Universities are currently experiencing significant structural and cultural changes due to financial pressure and market forces. We are interested in how these changes impact upon academics’ sense of self and how academics negotiate and perceive the requirements of their mandatory performance reviews, in particular the significance of course evaluations in this process, and how this in turn affects academic practice. In the broader context, these questions are investigated by theorists studying organisations, often using psychoanalytical perspectives to do so. Gabriel (2012) outlines that these perspectives often position organizations as “ailing patients” affected by various pathologies such as paranoia or schizophrenia (p. 1138), using terms such as toxic or polluted to describe the collective state of mind of the pathological organization and writing of “a recurring surfacing of apocalyptic images of annihilation, a naturalization of a pseudo-clinical language of death...and, above all, a constant split between good and evil, useful and useless, deserving and underserving, healthy and diseased” (p. 1143).

Within this context, we contribute our psychological state of claustrophobia, or as we call it: *Classtrophobia* – the anxiety triggered by the institutionalization of university classrooms which entrap the sufferer in evaluation systems from which one cannot escape. Before we explore this *Classtrophobic* state, it will be useful to briefly outline *Classtrophobia*'s trigger: namely the current condition of academia and our institution's evaluation procedures (which are broadly similar to most Australian university contexts).

In our institution, most academics are allocated 20% service, 40% research, and 40% teaching as the default academic work profile. We undergo an annual performance review where we are evaluated on performance across each of these three components. The stated purpose of the review is to “support the continued high performance of staff, career development...the maintenance of academic standards and the advancement of the University's strategic objectives.” Our teaching is almost solely evaluated based on the numeric responses we receive from students on our SEC. In the SEC, students respond to an anonymous Likert style survey for each course and are free to make anonymous comments on what they found valuable and what could be improved. Each survey has six standard questions, with the final question being, “Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this course?”, the question used in performance review. This particular score is publicly available to all university staff. If the average response score falls below 3.5/5, academics are required to complete a “course improvement plan” and may then be labelled as “performance needs improvement” or “unsatisfactory.” If teaching evaluation scores are above 4.8, the academic may receive a letter of Commendation from the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). These quality teachers are recognized publicly and are also encouraged to submit an application (a five-page persuasive report) to win a teaching award, which becomes a source of evidence when an academic pursues the goal of promotion. Interestingly the Commendation is only awarded if the response rate is from a large number of students; however, course improvement plans can result based on the feedback of one or two students.

Suffice to say, these student evaluations are part and parcel of the job of most academics. If academics wish to work in university organizations, they have to undergo these evaluations, as this is how teaching performance will be managed. If enough students do not complete the evaluation, the data response rate may be insufficient. This can result in a requirement to demonstrate a commitment to soliciting students to complete the evaluations in future course offerings. Hence academics are required to be complicit in a process that they likely disagree with. Orr and Orr (2016) suggest that

the reason why we must judge educational quality with metrics is because universities are no longer educational institutions (or at least not enough to tell the difference between good and bad teaching or have confidence in their ability to do so). (p. 24)

If universities are not educational institutions, then what are they? According to Alvesson (2013), many universities have become an “image-boosting business,” a type of business that needs to compete for attention and thus relies on “illusion tricks” to present itself in the most attractive way possible. To maintain its state of “grandiosity” it needs sustaining pseudo-structures (Alvesson, 2013), such as quality assurance projects – metrics, managerialism, and bureaucratization (the MMB University) (Orr & Orr, 2016, p. 15) – that demonstrate that quality is being assured. These quality assurance structures may signify little or nothing at all: it is only

the evaluation procedure that exists; the environment from which the data is collected will not change *ipso facto* of the procedure. The lead author's *Classtrophobia* video work is also a direct response to these grandiosity projects, as it stands against and exposes what lies beneath the surface of the university advertisement.

Universities are often driven by, modelled on, and operated according to, private-sector, Fordist style, management principles. Through centralised management, universities attempt to show that they are accountable, flexible, and efficient systems serving economic goals (Brenneis, Shore, & Wright, as cited in Shore, 2010, pp. 15–16). Radice points out that the neoliberal ethos of capitalism has transformed the university sector in the following ways (as cited in De Vita and Case, 2016, pp. 4–5).

First, the university has changed from a place for public good which educated its students with a broad liberal education, cultivated critical inquiry and debate, and promoted the values of autonomous learning; to places of private good, where students purchase knowledge to compete in the labour market. Universities have transformed from places that generate and disseminate knowledge for its intrinsic worth and development of society, to “transnational business corporations operating in a ‘competitive knowledge economy’” (Shore, 2010, p. 15). In this situation students have become customers and academic teachers have become service personnel providing students with opportunities that will lead to employment. In such a context, universities are faced with the competing demands of the students (as customers and consumers of knowledge) and the academics (as producers/sellers of knowledge) (Vannini, 2006, p. 244). Unfortunately, many higher education institutions appear to have taken the view that education should be considered primarily a service industry with student satisfaction as a main priority (Gruber, Reppel, & Voss, 2010). From such a perspective, fee-paying students become consumers of a product and thus come to behave more like customers than students (Watson, Narasimhan as cited in Gruber, et al., 2010, p. 175). For many students the equation appears to be “pay fees = pass course” without a commensurate commitment to the level of work required to succeed. This market mindset has academics dealing with students whose main motivation may be attaining a university diploma as a means of obtaining employment (Vannini, 2006, p. 248) rather than as primarily a means to make a meaningful contribution to society. The key question posed by the framing of universities as educational markets is the notion of what is gained and lost by offering higher education as a marketable commodity. These gains and losses are highly value-laden and have significant impacts upon students, teaching staff, the broader educational community, and our society.

Second, university administration is no longer driven by the collegiality of the academics but by professional managers who control academic work through bureaucratic procedures. Academics are performance-managed using management models from the business sector. Consequently, university staff are measured and monitored in ways that can easily “demonstrate” accountability and efficiency.

Third, university culture has moved from largely supporting and driving intellectual ferment, to a culture that focuses on competition to reach quantitative targets which drive competitiveness (competition in terms of journal rankings, competition for grants, competition for teaching awards, competition for contracts, competition for student enrollments). In this context, academics often view themselves as “resources adding or failing to add value to the organization” (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1140). In the accountability and monitoring culture, academics are constructed as inherently untrustworthy beings (Shore, 2010) necessitating surveillance and scrutiny. Thus:

the scholar has become either the beggar-suppliant, imploring, through their grant application, the deities of funding, or the caped penitent, ritualistically submitting themselves to the latest ordeal of evaluation, their guilt already confirmed by the very necessity of the trial. (Riemer, 2016, p. 39)

Researchers investigating the consequences of these management regimes highlight that academics experience a feeling of loss of autonomy, disenchantment feelings of alienation, estrangement, a survival-mindset, and a sense of resignation and powerlessness to effect change. Metaphors abound to describe this type of university: from schizophrenic (Shore, 2010), psychotic (Sievers, 2008), miasmatic (Gabriel, 2012) or zombified (Walker, Moore, & Whelan, 2013), to which we add our own *Classtrophobic* condition. The volume of such reflection points to the collective existential condition of academics in the neoliberal university. The problem with this collective pathology is of course a threat itself to the MMB University, which claims its structures create efficiency and productivity, rather than dysfunction. But unhappy workers are not productive workers.

Problems with “Student Satisfaction” as a Criterion: Causality and Nomenclature

We have argued that market forces have led many universities to mirror the marketing practices of the corporate business sector. One outcome of such practices is the framing of students as customers or clients which, in turn, influences how universities evaluate the student experience, often resulting in a narrowing of emphasis onto student satisfaction. Students are regularly surveyed to assess their level of (dis)satisfaction with course quality. However, student satisfaction is a slippery concept to measure. Rowan (2013) suggests that student satisfaction is influenced by a host of factors, including reasonableness of study load, teacher attitudes, assessment, feedback, and clarity of course expectations. These factors would appear to indicate that student satisfaction in some way correlates with educational inputs. Therefore, understanding the interplay of these factors in influencing satisfaction is important to overall student learning (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006, pp. 254-255). However, many factors that influence student satisfaction, such as demographic traits or dissatisfaction with aspects of their life (e.g., financial situation, personal relationships) are non-educational but highly likely to impact negatively on student satisfaction ratings. Although these factors are outside the realm of control for academics, it is academics who will be the recipient of these ratings and largely held accountable for them (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012, p. 3).

Although it is unsurprising, given the economic imperatives driving many universities, that regular surveys of student satisfaction occur, a larger problem lurks behind their use. Regardless of the fact that they primarily measure satisfaction (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012, p. 826), the nomenclature surrounding these surveys describes them as teaching evaluation surveys or course quality surveys. For instance, in our university, although many of the end-of-semester survey questions relate to educational issues including assessment, course content, teaching approaches and the like, the one question which is used to determine whether course improvements are required is the question “Overall, how satisfied were you with this course?”

Determining what the students are actually evaluating in their “evaluation of courses” is critical. Should we be willing to define “effectiveness” merely in terms of student satisfaction,

given its complexity? Furthermore, the process of then somehow equating this measure to an evaluation of teaching quality is fraught with pitfalls, as we shall see when the statistical integrity of SEC scores is considered.

Validity and Legitimacy of the SEC

The primary, and often sole, vehicle used to determine course effectiveness is an end-of-course survey, by which students are encouraged to respond to a range of statements using a Likert scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Although there is an option for qualitative feedback, it is the numbers that count in university “quality control” procedures. The use of SEC scores in determining teaching or course quality is problematic, both in terms of the statistical procedures followed (validity of measure) and in determining whether the SEC measures what it purports to measure (legitimacy of measure).

Concerns regarding the validity of SEC scores are not new. Rowan (2013) finds that the literature on the issue is “vast and wide reaching, crossing discipline and national boundaries” (p. 132). It seems that few issues within academia have been as well researched, documented, and long-lasting as the issue of student evaluation of teaching. In the current debate, Stark and Freishtat (2013a) identify a number of problems of validity in the use of SECs, including: low response rates; the expectation that low response rates is a de facto indicator of poor teaching; human nature, which tends to lead people to complain more loudly than praise; and the use of ordinal, categorical data, which makes it difficult to measure course effectiveness or make comparisons between courses or academics (e.g., to what extent is a rating of “5” better than a “4”?) (n.p.). Somewhat ironically (in the authors’ experience), although universities interpret low scores as indicative of below-average teaching, they do not necessarily interpret high scores as indicative of above-average ratings for teaching.

This debate is far from ideological, as the inappropriate use of such data, often flawed in terms of its collection and analysis, impacts unfairly on the careers of many academics. The conversion of SEC scores into statistical accounts, and then the further treatment of them as though they exist in reality, provides an illusion of objectivity that can be highly consequential for the individuals concerned, particularly when they are used to reward or sanction academics (Titus, 2008, p.18). Buchanan (2011) quite scathingly critiques the use of SEC scores, saying “Those who use these figures believing them to be true are arguably being defrauded, and surely those who use them knowing or presuming them to be false, are being fraudulent” (p. 71).

While the statistical validity of many of the SEC procedures is easily challenged, their legitimacy is more problematic to discern. Beavis (2012) suggests that despite their ubiquitous use in higher education, they are highly controversial with concerns raised both about their validity and the manner in which they are used. The link between student evaluation of course and resultant improvement in teaching poses two questions; first, whether such evaluations are in any way measuring student learning as opposed to student satisfaction; and second, is there a link between the use of SEC scores and improved outcomes for students. These are important considerations for, as Rowan (2013) indicates, “evidence of student satisfaction with a specific university study experience is often used to justify ongoing investment in the particular processes and pedagogies employed within that 'successful' scenario” (p. 132) to the detriment of other possible processes and pedagogies.

In answering the first question, contemporary research appears to indicate that, at best, the SEC are primarily a measure of student satisfaction. Bedgood and Donovan (2012) reviewed the literature – including Bedgood and Pollard’s analysis of 800 survey items from 30 course evaluation surveys used in Australian universities – and concluded that “the use of student satisfaction to evaluate teaching quality is unjustifiable” (p. 826). Worthington acknowledges that many of the questions appearing in course evaluations concern curriculum design, course aims and objectives and teaching performance; but notes that these elements are “most influenced by variables that are unrelated to effective teaching” (as cited in Stark & Freishstat, 2013b, n.p.). Extending on this point, Clayson and Hayley (2011) argue that regardless of the measures used, there are a consistent 20% of academics who are “rated by students in the same class as the *very* best or the *very* worst teachers that a student has *ever* had” (p. 102). What is suggested by this finding is that although course evaluation surveys *might be able* to identify the difference between very poor and very good teaching, they are “ill designed to make fine distinctions in the vast intermediate range” (Gray & Bergmann, 2003, n.p.).

The answer to the second question – the link between SEC scores and improvements of teaching – is unclear. Some early research into the connection reported a positive correlation between SEC scores and reported learning (Cohen; Abrami, et al.; as cited in Titus, 2008, p. 410). However, according to Titus (2008), no evidence indicates a measurable relationship between learning and course evaluation scores alone; indeed, some studies indicate unintended negative effects as a result of the use of student ratings (p. 398). This is critical as the rationale behind the use of SEC is that they improve teaching at both an institutional and individual academic level. This rationale appears to fly in the face of research suggesting that as yet there is no direct evidence that the use of SEC scores improves student learning or that the SEC themselves are sufficient to motivate any measurable teaching improvement (Olivares, as cited in Titus, 2008, p. 398).

Impacts on Student Learning

Despite the methodological flaws identified thus far, many universities have relied on SEC data to make decisions regarding strategic changes to the range of courses offered, the method of their offering, as well as decisions regarding the career trajectory of academic staff (Bedgood & Donovan, 2012, p. 827). We have argued that, as a result of validity and legitimacy concerns, the SEC evaluations are unlikely to be measuring teaching quality. This has implications for both students and academics. Regardless of what is intended to be measured, or whether this is indeed measured or can be measured, the act of measurement affects students, in terms of the message they receive about matters such as assessment or the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers. And it clearly affects the academics responsible for the delivery of these courses.

Thus far we have suggested that SEC scores are surrounded by concerns over validity and legitimacy, and that institutions which use them to drive educational change create negative consequences for students and academics alike. In educational theory at least, the principal purpose for student evaluations is the provision of constructive feedback to lecturers about student learning; however, there are a range of educational problems in how they are currently deployed in universities. First, they suggest to students that expertise can be reduced to a number, which negates a more holistic approach to the subtleties and complexities of learning

(Buchanan, 2011, p. 68). Second, the students see little benefit from, or understanding of, the process and appear to see their completion as an onerous task rather than as an opportunity to improve future course offerings (Beavis, 2012, p. 28). Third, the process is time-consuming for teachers, academics, and administrators (Clayson & Haley, 2011, p. 109), who might spend the time more productively by responding to student learning needs. Finally, overuse of student ratings to judge teaching quality may deter innovation in subject matter or teaching strategy, particularly if a current method seems to produce above-average ratings (Gray & Bergmann, 2003, n.p.).

Dumbing Down as a Response

The net effect of these forces can create a critical dilemma for academics: Do they continue to attempt to provide a quality educational experience or do they “dumb down” the courses to keep students, and perhaps academic supervisors, happy? The acceptance of the student evaluation process has led to what Rowan (2013) describes as a “student-run university environment: with decisions about content, pedagogy and assessment being made – not by appropriately qualified and experienced academics – but by the students undertaking the courses” (p. 136). In such a context, despite the academic being better positioned to determine what students need in terms of learning, the students end up highly influencing what is taught, how it is taught and often by whom it is taught. Buchanan (2011) argues that instead of operating as a disruptive influence, challenging students’ secure positions in order for development to occur, many university teachers are “driven to perform stunts and to entertain, rather than devolving to their students due responsibility for the heavy lifting of learning” (p. 68–69). Stark and Freishtat (2013a) argue that it is widely accepted that teachers can easily manipulate the popularity system (e.g., by timing feedback collection after positive assessment results) – such that “good teachers get bad ratings; bad teachers get good ratings” – and that “fear of bad ratings stifles pedagogical innovation and encourages faculty to water down course content” (n.p.).

Academics, rather than challenging students to critique the status quo as a way to transform society (which is controversial and provoking) may instead appeal to students’ hedonistic drive through entertainment and meeting their expectations of what learning is. Making learning fun might prevent future teachers, for example, from learning how to diagnose children’s learning problems, or address issue of disadvantage and disability that they will encounter in the classroom, since these challenging issues are less easily incorporated into “fun” activities. Avoiding difficult and controversial topics might mean that the future teachers have fun in their university classroom, engendering positive feelings towards the class and their fun academic, leading to positive evaluations; they might say, “I loved this course, it made learning fun and will be so useful for my future teaching!” However, this may not translate to deep learning in the course or to effective teaching strategies once they graduate.

Unfortunately, the ultimate losers of the rating game are the students as academic ideals and standards become further subverted (Fox, 2013, n.p.). As more and more academics play the SEC score game, grades will be inflated, courses will be dumbed down, and students will be excused from the intellectual challenges that university entails. This may lead to “negative consequences on the overall quality of the educational experience for students” (Wright, 2006, p. 417). Given that student evaluations of courses are used as a source of information for decisions concerning tenure and promotions, our concern, in addition to the negative educational impact on

students, is for the ultimate bearer of any of these consequences: namely academics who, in the most part, strive to be authentic to their vocation. The research cited here appears to indicate that their use is an implicit incentive for academics to shift away from the “high road” of imparting the historic values of higher education and a shift towards following the “low road” to success by modifying courses to enhance student satisfaction instead of student education.

So then, what is an appropriate personal and professional response to the receipt of bi-annual SEC scores, given the understanding that, at best, they measure student satisfaction and, at worst, are a source of illegitimate data upon which career trajectories hinge. Do we panic as Weir (2011) did or is another response called for?

An A/r/tographic Response

In the sections below, the first author will explore her lived-experience of teaching in a context where the quality of teaching is primarily reduced to a number correct to one decimal place. These experiences will be rendered through the methodology of *a/r/tography* whereby a video artwork is created as a means of reflection into the first author’s psychic state.

A/r/tography is concerned with self-study (Irwin & Springgay, 2008), through which researchers “problematize the notion of ‘new relationships between art, education and research’ and the distinction made between the three roles of arts-based scholars: researchers, educators, and artists (Slattery, 2003, p. 193). In an *a/r/tographical* inquiry, “meanings reside in the simultaneous use of language, images, materials, situations, space and time” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix). Investigating the phenomena through creating art and writing (the art and the graphy) allows the artist/researcher/teacher to delve deeply into their lived-experiences of teaching. In this context, if the academic teacher identity is inherently bound up in, constructed upon, or constricted by SEC scores as the ultimate arbiter of quality teaching, how can the contiguity of this teacher construct be rendered in an *a/r/tographical* inquiry?

In the account below, the language will shift to first person and will be written in a reflexive writing style to provide accounts of the thought process during acts of creation. Sometimes the reflections will turn to explanation of the places from which ideas emerge, and sometimes they fall into acts of interpretation of the visual imagery generated. These, in turn, become prosaic in nature. Only certain components that are of relevance to this paper have been provided, while more detailed meanderings about the creative mind will be left to other textual renderings.

Classtrophobia

Onset: The Visual Stimulus

The idea for the work itself began before the above inquiry was initialized. Looking through the media art website, Rhizome, I came across a curatorial project that brought together video works which applied the “the techniques and content of Troll and comment culture, using the unfixed honesty of others, and their own, detached sincerity” (Lucky PDF, 2012, ¶4). In one of the videos a social media celebrity, “tumblr famous” Molly Soda, videos herself reading her

posts aloud. The video goes for 10 hours (reminiscent of classic video works, like Warhol's eight hours of the empire state building or five hours of a man sleeping). Lucky PDF explains:

The internet gives us an opportunity to be honest because we know the repercussions are limited. Social media can be so anti-social because there's no immediate consequence to us being inconsiderate. For the same reasons there's no requirement to tell the truth, and few easy ways to verify what's real.

It is in this environment that the Troll thrives. Trolling is not the art of lying, it's the art of convincing others that you're telling the truth, which you might well be, even if only in the moment you hit 'post'...

All interactions are tinged with suspicion as we assume everyone's online sincerity is as fleeting as our own. Other people become less real because we're not being entirely real ourselves. (¶1-3)

As I read about the video, it became apparent that, for me, SEC scores were very much like these anonymous internet posts. My thoughts immediately turn to my own artmaking, and I conceive the idea that I can video myself reading out all the SEC reports I have ever received. I am amused at the thought about how many hours this would take. From this initial stimulation, the metaphor of student as troll in the context of SEC emerges. Where would this metaphor take me?

This thought consumed me more than the other art ideas I was exploring at the time. For months I mulled over as to how I would render this video work.

What metaphors?

What metaphors?

What metaphors?

It cannot be just a video of me reading comments

the subject needs to be depersonalised

maybe just a close-up of my mouth reading

cliché

churning

pondering

stirring

days pass

the idea assembles in mind

what metaphor for the visual context for this video?

as I entered the toilet cubicle (next to my office at work)

I glanced down at the old toilet bowl

discoloured and degraded from years of use

water in bowl staring back at me

thought immediately fills mind:

video footage of this water in the bowl –

that's depersonalised

decrepit

YES

No

NO

toilets are a cliché

but there is something here though

looking around

in the toilets

in the hallway

on the floor of my office

stains

leaks

fungus

dead insects

dust

cobwebs

rodent faeces

paint peeling

paint falling

paint crumpling

rips

tears

frays

splotches

marks

cracks

residue

spills

I decided to photograph these defects, which are largely unseen, unnoticed, (or perhaps ignored and seen no more). They come from two areas: the “staffroom” (or “teachers’ lounge,” in some places outside Australia) shared by a handful of academics and the “art studios” in which I teach and from where the voice of the evaluations emanate.



Figure 2. “Classtrophobia Still – Studio – Road to Fungus”

Auditory Reactions: Recording Students’ Evaluations

Like Molly Soda’s video outlined above, I intended to record myself reading all of my past student evaluations. The recording would last for hours as I read them out in a monotone, machine-like drone. The purpose would be much like Molly Soda’s:

Disarming the trolls by showing the scale of their insignificance she also discards the fan mail from her young, impressionable admirers. Perhaps this is exactly what all of them wanted, a few seconds of her attention, the knowledge that she cares enough to spend ten hours not caring. This is a cathartic performance and a reminder of the inhuman scale to which our online presence can grow. (Lucky PDF, 2012, ¶7)

To make the project more manageable, I eventually decided to focus on just recording evaluations from my most recent semester of teaching. Focusing solely on one semester meant I could constrain my experiences to a recent moment of time. Reading my course evaluations fills me with nauseating dread, so I deliberately did not open my semester’s evaluations when they were available. Waiting until I was ready to record was an artistic strategy of capturing the lived-experience of that moment. I downloaded each document from the evaluations report system (5 documents). The documents include numeric evaluations (quantitative data) of the course on one page, and also include students’ written responses (qualitative data) to two questions: What did you find particularly good about this course? and How could this course be improved?

As always, before I start reading my evaluations, my heart rate and breathing increases with a corresponding surge of brain chemicals changing my psyche. There is distinct nervousness and anxiety. Why is this such an intense experience? In the past, after I have read the evaluations, my mind races, and even though I receive many wonderful comments, I always

fixate on the negative ones, the inane comments, the absurd comments. Some disturb me because the comment might be a personal attack or because they reveal utter stupidity, and you wonder, “Why do I even bother!” One of my all-time favorite responses to the question *How could this course be improved?* was: “Lectures were early, and they always started on time. I found when I arrived late, I struggled to catch up with what has happened.”

The lovely comments wash over me very quickly. Negative ones keep gnawing at me for days. As Schopenhauer (1850/1970) indicated, “As a rule we find pleasure much less pleasurable, pain much more painful than we expected” (p. 42). The evaluations disturb my being. I live as artist, researcher, teacher. Teaching is life. The absurdity inherent in the statement of “work-life balance” implies work is not-life. I wake up, I am alive; I go to work, I die. If teaching was this “not-life,” then those end of semester evaluations would not rouse me. Unless I am the living-dead (things to come).

*The digital pages of comments and numbers, belittle my existence.
This is what I thought of 6 months of your life....
I taught you for 13 weeks and you have reduced the experience to this!
Clearly we are at cross purposes. Somehow these responses represent an opponent. An adversary. A force fighting against me.
Students become the experts evaluating pedagogy they have just began to learn about.
Consumers of knowledge. “I am paying for this you know.”
I didn’t go into teaching because I wanted to be a door-to-door sales man (person) peddling you encyclopaedias.*

All these concepts sit at the back of my mind as I prepare to read my evaluations. These documents become another nail in the coffin that captures me in the death-work. As I open my evaluations, recorder in hand, I read and record. I am more focused on my voice. My focus is directed towards how I record, more so than the emotional response to reading the evaluations. It becomes a therapeutic strategy. I record, and somehow remove myself from feeling. Thoughts emerging during voice recordings:

The student trolls in course evaluations are disembodied from the situation. Their body cannot be captured in their snippets of commentary. One moment. One mood. They are not malicious trolls. They don’t know how it makes me feel. They don’t know there is a me at the end of this.

There would still be trolls. The students that were not in body. The students that were not present with me.

I experience a sense of relief in conceptualizing these as troll words. It is somehow not their fault. They are blameless. It is just the nature of the medium that makes them so. “It is composed of information rather than matter” (Donath, 1999, p. 30).

*Do not feed the troll.
Do not teach the troll.
What could a troll ever learn?
The troll needs to learn how to learn.*

Paracusia: Auditory Peak

I am now distorting my audio recordings. The quality of my natural voice is not suggestive enough for an artistic response. As I am listening and making decisions about what type of distortion to apply, I realize that I bring to the forefront of my mind the question of what exactly am I trying to capture through this distortion. What lived experience am I trying to render? I have to remember that it is the experience of my course evaluations. As I attempt various distortions (Speed, Pitch, Tempo, Echo, Reverse, Wahwah), I identify that lowering the pitch and speed is the effect that aligns with the mood I am attempting to capture in my work.

As I listen to my voice distortions, the voice of the troll emerges. Have I become the troll? No. I am reading what the students have said. I am speaking in their troll voice. Unconscious connecting thoughts. As I go through each audio file, I submerge deeper beneath the surface, not remembering why I am here in the first place. I am experiencing the aesthetic of each sound file. As I render each file, I play with it more, I explore more effects, I narrow down to particular wave forms. I focus on the errors in the audio. The breathing. The weird enunciation. I start bringing these components forward in the making: *because they are beautiful.*

I entered a pattern in transforming the voice to low pitch and lowering the speed. With the files that are left, what if I increase the speed? Yes quickly, the quickening of responses. The student quickly saying something in a few words, quickly recording their experience of the course. Without thought. Something that has to be done. Is requested to be done, and is done. Myself, quickly reading the responses. Quickly, so as not to be swept up with the emotions that reading the evaluations instill. Not to bring to consciousness the opinion of others upon months spent of life. Myself listening to myself.

I am being swept by association. But quickness does not capture the mood of the work. Also, the speed increase in voice is a recognizable sound effect in our media-saturated existence (the fast-forward video effect). These are the wrong associations. The slowing down. We hear this less. It brings other associations.

Slowness transformations suggest mental breakdown. I transform the voices so slow now. So slow I cannot understand the words. My brain not working. Brain has been damaged. Damaged by expectation and weight of judgment. Thought breaks down connection to speech. So this is the experience. A pain. Mental anguish of being trapped in performative exhibition. Self trapped in monotone. I cannot escape from these relations. The troll, the “lowest-common-denominator humanity” (Adams, 2011, ¶11). My thoughts:

The slow and dumb-witted troll:

“You helped me to learn good,”

“You are helping me learn,”

“It helped me to learn....”

The evaluation comment that I was particularly drawn to, and that I repeated over and over again in the sound editing.

Student trolls, evaluating whether you had “helped them to learn.”

The big dumb troll, so much power in its oversized, clumsy body.

The troll voice becomes mechanized through further audio distortion. The student as machine.

I become machine in the eternal embrace of the machine system. They make me and I become them:

The fan/troll relationship is symbiotic - both of them need the other to properly function. There's no point attacking something unless there's someone to fight back and no better way to prove your fandom than mounting a defence (not that anyone will ever win). (Lucky PDF, 2012, ¶8)

I multiply the voices in the sound editing, and loop them upon themselves. But then there are multiple voices. One turned into many. Repeating the same thing. They are the same. They say the same things. They are one student body. Without body. Thinking. Not thoughtful. Repeating. Parroting undecipherable random words. "Bad faith" (Sartre, 1943/1989, p. 55) of the student. I sustain the role of the student. I am the student. I am the student in the evaluation system.

More voices are now talking in unison. My voice is in there, but is not recognizable. But I know that it is there, reading out the course evaluations. I speak through them. I am speaking with their voice. They are all voice. I am possessed by their voice. Echoing. The voices in my mind remain after reading. Repeating to the point of absurdity. This is absurd. An act of absurdity.

The track of silence

I have cut out the sections where I take a breath. And assemble this into its own track. Extend and amplify. It is the breathing. The silence and the noise. It is me breathing as I read out the evaluations for the first time. It is my presence. It is the audience of the evaluation. I am there. It is not a machine. There is somebody at the end of this process. The one who the evaluations are aimed at. It is me taken out of this. My existence sitting outside observing. Extended in time. Always present in the constant. But with noise and disturbances of emotion. Just sip the air to preserve oxygen.

Video Sequences: In the Throes of the Living-Dead

I take video of the rooms to overlay the still images. I focus on capturing movement and sound to create a texture to the work. Feel myself losing myself while recording capturing shadows and light reflections. No. Losing myself is not a positive feeling, it is terrifying. I am not terrified. I feel in place at this moment. I have found myself.

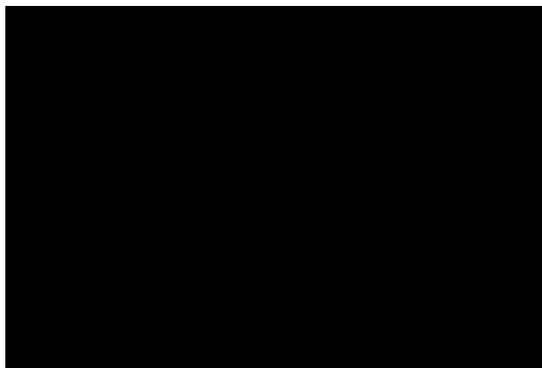


Figure 3. “Classtrophobia Video – Studio – Reading Out the Qualitative Data”
(available at <http://vimeo.com/99415128>)

Reviewing the clips on the computer, I am drawn to the imagery with my shadow, stumbling, shuffling. Like zombie stumbling. The living dead after the apocalypse. The tension rises as the zombie approaches. The last gulps of toxic air. Why these immediate associations? For decades our psyche has been trained by movie-watching, the collective tropes that we have fully integrated into our sense-making. I edit as an audience watching a narrative unfold.

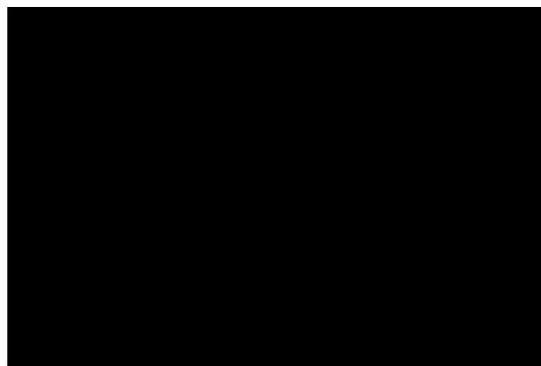


Figure 4. “Classtrophobia Video – Staffroom – Reading out the Quantitative Data”
(available at <http://vimeo.com/84871096>)

As I watch the video again, I notice particular components, and think how an audience may interpret them. For example, there are repeated sequences which feature shots of electrical power points (sockets). Is this a metaphor? This was not my immediate intention. It was just one of those incongruous features of this minuscule staffroom that absorbed me. A blue wall with a constellation of them, serving no discernible purpose, haphazardly positioned, existing there as a left over from some electrical accident. It is as if an alien race tried to emulate a wall for humans. I see the objectness of objects. I capture the formalist compositions that are found existing in front of me. Meaning does not reside here in the shape of things. Does one wish it would? Maybe in fact it does. Maybe this is the exact signifier of the condition being captured. Absurdities of things that somehow come to be normalized. Starring you in face, yet somehow impalpable.

This power point sequence captures the essential nature of this room. Its neuroticism intrigued me. Its abandoned frozen distastefulness, within an institution that does not know it exists. I am showing this to you now. Showing you what I see. Welcome. Come on in. Have a look. This decrepit room. Some sort of memory chamber of academic nightmares. Memories of how things used to be. Welcome to the past. Welcome to their preservation room. Welcome to

the damned. Welcome to the waiting room to death. Welcome to the waiting room of purgatory. Welcome to the dirt, cobwebs, insects, and vermin shit. Welcome to the space between the evaluation reports. Welcome to your (dis)satisfactory experience.



Figure 5. “Classtrophobia Still – Staffroom – Simply Shit”

Embodiment of space

Welcome to the old, second hand appliances that were not thrown away but were brought here. Welcome to the meeting room of rejected armchairs that disappeared from one place and then appeared in this room. Welcome to memory emerging.



Figure 6. “Classtrophobia Still – Staffroom – Eliminating the Faith Trolls”

I remember, some many years ago, that the hallway outside our offices was lined with armchairs. These armchairs afforded the impulse for students to come and lounge upon them. Students loitered hours on end, making sounds of boisterousness. At one point the chairs attracted a daily born-again Christian group prayer session; "...let us close our eyes...". The walls are thin plasterboard, as the offices themselves were reconstructed at a later date from the vastness of '70's hall space. Enough was enough, and the chairs had to be gotten rid of. I remember moving the armchairs, hiding them in any room possible. I remember cramming as many chairs as I could into this tiny staffroom.



Figure 7. "Classtrophobia Still – Staffroom – Vertigo of Armchairs and Power Points"

These chairs are here because of me. I forgot this. They are my act. My presence. My act to change the behavior of the trolls emerging from the cracks. These armchairs don't signify the absence of people in the staffroom. These armchairs are not here because anybody sits on them. Nobody ever sits on them. They do not suggest congregation of staff who come in and use the room. You quickly go in, do your photocopying, make your tea, use the microwave, and then quickly run back to your office. Quickly, because you are so busy. Don't have time to linger. You need to record your death shift so that your death can be secured ever more to fuel your life.

There is nobody ever here. It is kept locked. Need your key at all times. The door is very heavy. The room is storage for the chairs. Somebody moved the chairs once into this room and they have not been moved since. Because who would have the inclination to move them anywhere? Why move them? They are not in the way. They represent the stasis of spaces. The old space nobody will fix. The tap is old. Only has cold water. Nobody will fix it. The boiler is working. If it broke it would be fixed. It is important. The toaster. Somebody brought it once. I don't know who. Brought it here rather than taking it to the bin. I don't know if anybody uses it. I haven't seen anybody use it. But it has to be tagged and checked every year. Turn power off at

the switch. I don't know who wrote that and why they wrote it. This room used to be a film developing room when photography existed. When art was taught here as part of education. Now there are only traces of art. These are slowly slipping away with the cracks, leaks, and fungal growths. Now these fixtures don't mean anything. Freezer opens. They would fix it if it broke. Nobody uses the freezer. I use the freezer to freeze my juice so that it won't be drunk when I leave. Somebody used to drink my juice. They would just take little sips. I don't know who. I suspect. Until I left lime beetroot juice in there. They didn't drink that. They are gone now. The cupboard. Nobody uses it. It is not used for anything. It just props up the sink. Animals live in it. Maybe its asbestos. There was asbestos downstairs.

The room has taken a on greater level of significance since I have been making the work. It is now strongly integrated and connected to me. All its features and objects housed within. Only around five staff use it, while there are around 40 education academics at this campus. Everyone is distributed in various closets across six buildings and four floor levels. Each floor has its own staffroom and each one is different, with a different level of finish. I suspect that this one is the most decrepit one, but I can't say for certain as I have not seen them all.



Figure 8. “Classtrophobia Still – Studio – Orange Zombie”

The orange linoleum-floored room are the studios in which I teach. There are two rooms and the only rooms where art classes are held. Other classes also use these rooms. I have a feeling that these are “my rooms;” however, I am often reminded that that is not true. Because of course it is not. At this stage I have taught myself to feel fortunate that I can teach in them, because at any moment they can be taken away. Stability is not something that exists here, only the stifling contradiction between the grandiose illusion tricks and the real “smell of the place” (De Vita & Case, 2016).

Contiguity: Spaces In-Between

In the above section I relayed how I proceeded to inquire into my experiences of SEC scores through the creation of a video art work. I focused on the interplay of reflection and interpretation during the process of creation to not only uncover insights about my experiences, but also to inquire into how meaning of the phenomenon is constructed within this process.

The lived-inquiry through making (unlike a phenomenological investigation which seeks to reveal insights into the nature of a lived-experience) renders the construction of metaphors. Trolls, zombies and institutionalized nightmares emerge from the psyche in response to self-created images and sounds in response to the phenomena under investigation. These are not real threats, but phantasms that symbolize impending doom. Through interpretation I reclaim memories I forget I possessed and my reflection turns to constructs of spaces as the most poignant response to the scores – “In the words, or perhaps better, in spite of the words, we find ‘memories’ that paradoxically we never thought or felt before” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). The rendering of the two spaces (the “staffroom” and the “art room”) becomes a point of juxtaposition to contradict the assumptions of improvement implied by the SEC scores. It is of course the feeling of entrapment in these institutionalized spaces that triggers the onset of *Classtrophobia*.



Figure 9. “*Classtrophobia* Still – Studio – Through the Crack”

My reflection and interpretation throughout the making process created a richer tapestry for meaning creation to weave into writing and making. And while the two works presented are in a state of completion, I know that meaning is not yet final; there are multiple interpretations that can still emanate from me. As a critic, and viewer of my own art creation, I felt in control of where I was taking the work (in contrast to the lack of control one feels when being evaluated). Interestingly, even though I believe that meaning of the work should reside and belong to the artist,

I also feel that, as the work speaks of collective problems for academics who also deeply experience the angst of new neoliberal lives of surveillance; this work speaks to fellow academics as a point of connection. I hope and welcome the creation of another layer of meaning through their experience of the work, to create a deeper fold of experience, beyond that which is depersonalized, restless, and threatening.

Conclusion

Both authors are of the view that current surveys for measuring teaching quality and educational quality, and for benchmarking broader organizational performance, have been focused on student satisfaction rather than student learning (see Bedggood & Donovan, 2012). We are not opposed to the collection of information regarding our teaching. However, we agree with Clayson and Haley (2011), who note that student evaluation instruments “are only effective if they assist [academics] in improving teaching performance by providing diagnostic information that can result in actionable changes” (p. 102). Without this occurring, many academics will increasingly become anxious and defensive about their teaching and may adopt a range of cognitive constructs that protect their integrity as teachers but do little to improve the teaching act (McKeachie, as cited in Roche & Marsh, 2000, p. 446), should such improvement be in fact necessary. In extreme cases they may respond with “ineffectual strategies such as offering undeservedly high grades, or reducing appropriate levels of student workload in an attempt to attract undeservedly high [ratings]” (Roche & Marsh, 2000, p. 466).

Academic and professional ethics require that the authors, and academics more generally, take responsibility for defining what will count as good teaching and how this will be measured. Accountability for students’ learning cannot be replaced by an accountability for satisfied consumers. Students’ desires ought to be developed through, not simply satisfied by, their university experience. As Long and Lake (1996) state, faculty must vigilantly “patrol the boundaries of roles – our own and those of students” (p. 113). The alternative is that faculty who are effectively using an engaged, critical pedagogy will necessarily have to withstand the resentment, hostility, and low ratings of the students who hold to transmission model expectations. Without the resistance of academic professionals, devices and levers such as SECs will continue to be used to “distort academic values not appreciated in the marketplace into forms that comply with a consumer and corporate framework” (Titus, 2008, p. 415).

As Fox (2013) says, “No longer is it possible for an intelligent, well-informed person to believe that summative student evaluations accurately measure student learning or teaching effectiveness” (n.p.) and that “a majority of professors, across all disciplines, believe that summative student evaluations aren't good or fair measures of such things” (see Birnbaum and Crumley, as cited in Fox, 2013). In the meantime, while SEC scores still largely determine the milieu in which we operate, academics need to discover sustainable ways to respond to evaluations that are at best limited, and at worst, professionally and personally destructive. For the lead author, one such response was the creation of *Classtrophobia*.



Figure 10. “Classtrophobia Still – Studio – Hazy Exit”

Post Script 1: Classtrophobia Treatment

Facing your fears will not cure this underlying disorder (in the end, the threat is not irrational), but you may generate some openings (they are only fake walls after all) that will alleviate the symptoms, and reduce your chances of incapacitation and ultimate suffocation.

Post Script 2:

Since the initial creation of the video work in 2014, the university spaces discussed in this paper have been demolished, and have been replaced with Panopticon’s coagulation of corporate-padded-office-cells.

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