Educational Insights special issue on Academic Pathologies
From our Editors

In 2007 sociology professor, Doug Aoki, (University of Alberta) assembled a call for an issue of Educational Insights exploring the paradoxical relationship between pathology and normalcy in the context of teaching, research, labour, theory and writing within the Academy, “in love and hatred, pride and prejudice, genius and folly, sex and lies.” We place that call here now for the sake of framing the response, which this issue of Educational Insights, Academic Pathologies, represents.
Academic pathologies

Deadline January 15, 2008

Language, we have learned, is an especially tricky business. The first and common sense definition of pathology is “disease,” but its secondary definition exceeds the medical metaphor: “any deviation or departure from a normal condition.” The relevant trickiness starts to emerge when we consider the social, and it becomes obvious that the normal itself is regularly pathological: the “normal body” is obese, the “normal state of marriage” is divorce, “reality” is something that you normally watch on TV, the “normal urban vehicle” is an SUV, the “normal consequence” of retiring from a job you hate is dying, “normal teaching” is lecturing on material that has already been articulated in much finer fashion in a book by somebody much smarter.

When we focus on that peculiar social organization, the academy, we sink deep into Bruce Cockburn territory, because there, the trouble with “normal” is it always gets worse. So the language games on campus start with the gambit of a general paradox: the normal is regularly pathological, but so is any deviation from the normal. And it’s crucial to realize that it truly is the game that’s afoot. Personal failings are not the point. Neither are personal failures: the difficulty of getting a tenure-track job that slides into impossibility, writer’s block that begins to appear as literally terminal, or a well-deserved nomination to appear on What Not to Wear. (Who can afford to dress on a part-time lecturer’s salary?)

The game’s the thing. Alvin Kernan once described graduate school this way:

Trying to meet standards we scarcely understood, judged by people who seemed to come from a world other than our own, fated to make dreadful mistakes, we only made them worse when we tried to make them better…No merit we could conceive of would possibly save us, only…luck.

The trick to the academic game of course is that, in Kernan’s sense, graduate school never ends. Doing a PhD is as much acclimatization as it is training, because the proper locus of the real pandemic is neither the individual sufferer nor the population: it’s the institution!

The academy systematizes pathology through a myriad of vectors. Once again, the diagnosis turns on how we handle the language. Patho-, from pathos, means suffering or feeling; -logy, that definitive academic suffix, is the venerable normalization of logos, with all its familiarly appalling connotations. Then a productive reading of academic pathologies is the variable institutional logics of suffering and feeling in the university.

And so it is that articles that “trace out the many permutations of that logic and its different vectors of transmission: in teaching, research, theory, and writing; in love and hatred, pride and prejudice, genius and folly, sex and lies” cross our threshold. We receive these offerings with gratitude and humbleness in recognition of the pain, the resistance, the anger, and the hope that our writers offer us through their narratives, as they seek to articulate the inarticulate. These are the whisperings behind doors, in dark places, undertaken at a risk, in defiance, to witness, to confess, to speak to the need for us to reimagine habits of engagement within academic locations, to create opportunities of engagement that offer
voice, agency, opportunity, respect. Hannah Arendt spoke of the responsibility of educators to love children so much as to invite them to engage in the world’s renewal. This issue is our response, our hope, and our call to attention.

December 18, 2009