Studious Drift

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Introduction

With the launch of the digital platform called Studio_D (https://onstead.cvad.unt.edu/studio-d) in the spring of 2020, neither of us could foresee the impact of Covid-19 that was about to unfold. Our project had been developed months in advance of the pandemic with the hopes of getting interdisciplinary teams of scholars from around the world to write short prompts to (a) facilitate reflection on the ways in which e-learning has come to be embedded in any number of online resources, websites, and apps, and (b) to encourage participants to hack into and suspend the educational processes, subject positions, and relationships that e-learning promote. The prompts we received were exciting and provocative, if not perplexing. Some asked participants to deactivate the ubiquitous knowledge clip by subverting its implicit pedagogical assumptions, others opted to neutralize the spectacle of self-promotion known as the selfie by turning the camera toward the decisively unspectacular spaces used to study. Through intentional glitches, “bad” filming/editing, complex games meant to interrupt the economic exchange of information, and processes that slowed down the accelerationism of contemporary education practices, the prompts explored what happens when learning objectives, outcomes, and measures were left idle and a different modality of studious drift was embraced.

As faculty and students implemented such prompts (which we call protocols), it became clear that the exercise was a meditation
not simply on the prevalence of e-learning but also on the effects of Covid-19 on the ways in which we experience education. Students suddenly found their lives increasingly dominated by online courses and their social lives mediated by digital technologies. As such, the focus of the experiments on Studio_D took on a newfound urgency and relevance. The limited scope of Studio_D suddenly expanded and became a way to think about what was happening to education in the present lockdown conditions as well as a meditation on possible alternatives that digital education might take in a postpandemic world. How might our digital experiment with Studio_D promote a diversity of educational forms of life that could challenge the increasing predominance of e-learning, especially now that the Covid-19 crisis has expanded and intensified its reach? This book is an attempt to theorize the practice embodied by Studio_D in relation to this larger question, and, in conclusion, we propose a rather startling thesis: that the internet can become a studio for a radically anarchic and pataphysical practice of education, but only if we struggle against the dominance of the metaphysics of learning that continues to colonize the broader expanse of the postdigital world, threatening to reduce educational life to mere economic management.

**Beyond The Metaphysics of E-Learning**

In the lecture “What is a Creative Act?,” Gilles Deleuze (2007) argues that creation is always a resistance against an external threat. By resisting external controls, an internal potentiality is freed up. One might argue that a similar set of assumptions informs many of the current analyses of the university. It is through the co-optation of the university by external forces such as capitalism that prevent it from creatively reconstituting itself. Symptomatic here is the work of figures like Henry Giroux (2007), who argues that the university is in chains that shackle it to corporate power, the military-industrial complex, and right-wing ideology. Likewise, Stanley Aronowitz (2001) argues that the villains undermining the university include
conservatives calling for neoliberal austerity measures or administrators and bureaucrats (as villains who have already stormed the gates and sieged the ivory tower for their own purposes) who defund teaching while calling for continual measures of excellence and effectiveness. Certainly Giroux and Aronowitz are more or less correct in their analyses, and it is undoubtably the case that universities have been co-opted by such forces, though we would doubt there was ever a time when such cooptation was not a defining feature of the university (take, for instance, the intimate relationship between the construction of universities and slavery in the United States).

While not wanting to deny the power of the critiques offered by scholars such as Giroux and Aronowitz, the starting point for this book will be somewhat different. Unlike Deleuze (and, by extension, social critics), we want to begin by inquiring into the internal forces at work within the university that lend itself to cooptation from the outside. In other words, what is it about the educational logic of the university that makes it amenable to regimes of excellence, neoliberal marketization, austerity economics, corporate bureaucracy, and entrepreneurship (see Readings 1997; Giroux and Giroux 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Masschelein and Simons 2009; Fabricant and Brier 2016)?

It is our contention that, at its base, the problem stems from the overwhelming hegemonic dominance of the discourse and practice of learning in all sectors of education, from K-12 to our highest institutions. As Gert Biesta (2006) once wrote, this is symptomatic of the “learnification” of society writ large.¹ The fact that learning is an educational logic predicated on measuring outputs and accessing success and failure lends it as a support to economic imperatives (Arsenjuk and Koerner 2009; Lewis 2013, 2017; Ford 2016). Another way of thinking about this is that learning is the economization

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¹ See also Masschelein, Simons, Bröckling, and Pongratz (2007) for a discussion of the rise of the “learning society.”
of education where education becomes concerned with planning and calculation. Equal parts risk assessment and evaluation of efficaciousness in the language of productivity come to define all dimensions of what an educational life worth living might look like. This is not to disparage learning as such, but rather to highlight how learning as an *internal* mode of educational organization and practice within universities can and does appeal to broader economic interests, producing synergy between various sectors of social life that culminates in a new form of subjectivity: the life-long learner who must be continually entrepreneurial in order to reskill him or herself according to the needs of a quickly changing knowledge-based economy (Masschelein and Simons 2008).

More so than the aforementioned scholars, we want to make a stronger claim: learning is an educational metaphysics. As Martin Heidegger once defined it, metaphysics “grounds an age, in that through a specific interpretation of what is and through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis upon which it is essentially formed” (1977, 115). Today, according to Heidegger, we live in an age where the dominant definition of being (metaphysically speaking) is determined by and through technological enframing. Science is, essentially, the handmaiden of such enframing. In the university, science takes the form of research, which for Heidegger, has certain essential characteristics. For instance, research is “rigorous” insofar as it enframes or secures a specific object-area, and by doing so, secures the representation of the “real.” In this manner, the real comes to be divided up into specific representations pertaining to each science, each mapping out, in advance, a set of objects, laws pertaining to these objects, and a set of admissible questions and methods for experimenting on and with these objects. The enframed area of research thus becomes increasingly internally coherent. This self-referential coherence, in turn, produces a sense of objectness that is as natural as it is measurable and predictable. With regards to atomic physics, this coherence grants a privileged place for contingency in its understanding of the “real.” Heidegger writes, “Atomic physics admits only of a guaranteeing of an objec-
tive coherence that has a statistical character” (172). Note that, for Heidegger, the attempt to understand the real by atomic physics gives way to a statistical analysis or a calculation of probabilities. The real becomes that which is probable or calculable. Giorgio Agamben seems to offer an important amendment to this line of inquiry. For Agamben (2018), contemporary metaphysics concerns itself with radical contingency (of atomic physics) and with a subsequent management of such contingency through probabilistic sciences. In other word, if contingency comes to ground the age through the laws of quantum mechanics, then science takes on the management of such contingency through various calculations pertaining to different kinds of objects. The outcome for Agamben is a fundamental erasure of the question of what is real for the question of management of probabilities.

On our interpretation, learnification of society indicates that learning has become the educational metaphysics of the scientific age. It reduces education to a set of contingencies in order to govern these contingencies through the generation of evidence capable of making predictions concerning future outcomes. The science of pedagogy becomes a management strategy concerned with inputs and outputs guided by the law of educational excellence, efficacy, and efficiency. This process, in turn, determines the kind of educational life a student will have, what kinds of opportunities they will have access to, and what kinds of debts will have to be paid to achieve certain ends. Hence the dominance of “learning analytics” that merge “large data sets, statistical techniques, and predictive modeling” for “the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners in their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs” (cited in Long and Siemens 2011, 34). Thus the collection of learning analytics simultaneously indicates (a) contingencies in the present that (b) must be managed in order to (c) maintain high probability in future success while (d) ensuring that the measurement and assessment of learning is never complete, never finished, and always in need of further verification and accreditation. Whether
we are discussing the smallest atomic movements or the life cycles of learning, what is at stake across scalar levels is a metaphysical commitment to management (of the real).

As Siân Bayne and colleagues argue (2020), digital education, e-learning, and ed-tech are more often than not seen as complicit with the economics of learnification. Internet, computers, and enterprise learning management systems (LMSs) all function to capture data in increasingly sophisticated ways, further transforming education into a statistical science. If this is the case, then the recent acceleration of the digitization of the university, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, is part and parcel of not simply the learnification of the university but also the dominance of learning as an educational metaphysics writ large. At this point it is important to remember Heidegger’s diagnosis of technological enframing in relation to computerization. In Identity and Difference, Heidegger argues that the “time of calculation,” exemplified in the executable functionality of computer algorithms, now “pulls our thinking in all directions” (2002, 41) to the point where thinking itself begins to take on the enframing structure of planning, predicting, and controlling for variables within the given contingencies of a specified research field. Perhaps we might go so far as to say that what Heidegger is diagnosing here is the rise of computational subjectivity necessary to survive within a learning society.

More recently, Deleuze (1995b) wrote that digital language indicates a fundamental shift from discipline to control, from monitoring individual bodies to channeling impersonal data flows, from policing spaces to predicting and modulating future possibilities. On our reading, this would mean that digital technologies extend learning outward from the schoolhouse to the virtual learning environment that simultaneously trains subjects to be lifelong learners while also using algorithms to improve assessment, feedback, prediction of success, and surveillance. On the blog Dario della Crisis, Agamben seems to pick up on both Heidegger and Deleuze, presenting a scathing critique of the recent trend toward online learning. In his piece titled “Requiem per gli studenti” (2021), Agamben
makes the argument that the hasty push toward e-learning not only has put the last remnants of the university at risk but, more importantly, has sacrificed the educational form-of-life he refers to as *studentato*, or “studenthood.” For Agamben, students are those who “amano veramente lo studio [truly love to study].” To safeguard study against learning telematics, Agamben urges students to refuse to enroll in such classes (as with the famous autonomist Marxist refusal to work). Likewise, professors ought to refuse to hold their classes online. Given Agamben’s concern with study as a unique form of educational life (1995), this warning is predictable. Classrooms are being exchanged for digital environments that do not challenge learning so much as entrench it via the virtualization of control, and in the process, the unique opportunities for small study groups and studious friendships that arise from the intimate discussions of the university seminar are put in jeopardy. If study is a possible mode of educational life, then can we imagine such a life online? Agamben seems to think that this is highly unlikely, given the “spettrale schermo [spectral screen]” that has captured us. The screen separates students from their form of educational life (studenthood), which is embodied, communal, and dependent upon the university as a specific, physical location that fosters forms of studious association. Expanding on Agamben’s essential points, we would further add that the underlying worry concerns the ability of the screen to capture and direct attention away from study. In this sense, the screen becomes nothing more than a technological apparatus of learning, separating students from their potentiality for studenthood, and so becomes the apotheosis of the metaphysics of learning that is part and parcel of scientific (and computational) enframing.

The question then becomes: How to suspend the metaphysics of learning that has now become absolutized in the form of online

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2. For an overview of Agamben’s critique of the screen and a possible educational response, see Vlieghe 2017 and Lewis and Alirezabeigi 2018.

3. As we explore in chapter 2, this separation happens in two ways: summitting or browsing.
classes without necessarily retreating back to the predigital notion of the campus classroom? This book tackles the question of the politics of higher education by (a) critiquing the metaphysics of learning while offering (b) a *pataphysics* of studioing. This pataphysics is not merely an alternative metaphysics but also an impossible educational form of life that emerges when the space and time dedicated to learning are rendered inoperative. As we conceptualize it throughout this book, the pataphysics of studioing consists of several interlocking dimensions, including the virtual space of the studio, the drifting movement of study, and the experimental writing of protocols (that support study). Our claim is that studioing disrupts the connective points between discourses and practice of learning and economy that form the crux of the *internal* education problem facing the university today. We agree with Agamben that the rise to dominance of online education has fundamentally threatened the studious life of students as well as the foundations of the university. And we agree that the refusal to teach and to enroll in such classes is a serious option to consider. At the same time, we want to provide evidence of how university professors, lecturers, artists, designers, and (of course) students acting as pirates can hack into the digital infrastructure of universities to create online studio spaces that promote new modalities of study. As such, while Agamben contends that the screen is *necessarily* a technological apparatus of learning, we would like to suggest a slight shift and propose the possibility of what we call *e-studioing*, or a form of educational life that experiments with the potentiality for online education that is not reducible to a transactional notion of learning economics. The result will be a theory of e-studioing rather than e-learning that takes place in the virtual studio rather than the virtual learning classroom, is composed of unpractical practices of studying rather than the practicalities of learning, and is supported by the experimental writing of the “scyborg” (La Pau 2017) rather than the learning management strategies of the professor. This is not to suggest some kind of technophilic or neoliberal consumerist fantasy of a techno-corporate future wherein digital devices will
“save” the university and “improve” education by making it more excellent, more flexible, more economic, and more accommodating (Horn and Staker 2014). Deleuze and Agamben (not to mention Heidegger) have already warned us of the dangers of such a fantasy. There are no technological fixes for the on-going plight(s) of the university as we have come to know it in the industrialized West. At the same time, we see digitization as a terrain of struggle that should not be villainized or romanticized but rather hacked into and tinkered with in order to produce inefficient, less economic, less optimal, and more entropic/anarchic forms of pataphysical life that might very well seem absurd and unprofessional through the looking glass of the metaphysics of learning. Indeed, if we are truly living in a postdigital world in which divisions between online and offline educational environments are increasingly blurred (Ryberg 2021), then thinking the university without also thinking about the educational implications of digital technologies has ceased to make sense. We cannot, as Agamben seems to suggest, screen out the screen. Indeed, for those of us who accessed library collections, participated in study groups, and helped construct digital platforms during the Covid-19 lockdown, it is hard to imagine a strict distinction between e-studying and studiying to ever return (in any strict sense).

Our claims will be as follows: The space-time opened up and sustained by the studio has been underappreciated as apart from the institutions and organizations of which it is a part. This means that the studio is paradoxically both inside and outside, public and private simultaneously. By providing a genealogy of the studio in Western history, we will highlight how the strange location of the studio foreshadows certain virtual dimensions of the postdigital sphere (that are not reducible to mere control and modulation). The unique educational logic that emerges from within the studio is study as the neutralization of the economy of learning. In this respect we stand with other theorists of study as an alternative to learning (Agamben 1995; Harney and Moten 2013; Lewis 2013; Ford 2016), but we make a stronger claim than many proponents
of study and argue that study is a pataphysical educational logic. Drawing on the work of Alfred Jarry (1996), we see pataphysics as comprising the following key dimensions: it is a science that pursues (non)knowledge of exceptions and singularities (rather than metaphysical generalities), through a-disciplinary means, in order to discover/produce/create impossible solutions. In educational language, pataphysics renders inoperative the metaphysics of learning, suspends the functioning of any learning-testing apparatus by neutralizing the means-end logic that ties education to larger forces of economization. While the “science of pataphysics attempts no cures, envisages no progress, distrusts all claims of ‘improvement’ in the state of things” (Shattuck 1960, 28), so too does a pataphysics of study necessarily insert a drift within university education away from that which it has become, pushing it out-of-bounds of itself by taking up and playing with its infrastructure in institutionally reckless though creative ways that defy calculation, planning, and quantification.

Finally, there is a unique kind of writing that accompanies the pataphysics of study within the space-time of the studio. We call this activity “protocol writing,” which offers up simple yet often times paradoxical rules for impractical, ritualistic study. Whereas theorists have argued that the essential morphology of the university consists of the activity of lecturing within the space of the lecture hall (Marin 2020), we argue that this misses how universities also contain studio spaces that are apart from / a part of their infrastructure, enabling different kinds of writing that lend themselves to different kinds of study practices. Emerging from within the studio space as a formulation of study rules, protocols are not means to another end (as with lecture notes) but rather are means that open themselves up to circular forms of studious drift. These protocols may never make it to the lecture podium (in one form or another) because they are secret formulae for study that are often not com-

4. For more on pataphysics, see Hugill 2015 and Lewis 2020.
municable to others. Together, the space-time of the studio, the contemplation and experimentation of study, and the experimental writing of protocols form practices of studioing.

To formulate an educational theory of studioing, we will turn to an eclectic group of theorists, artists, and historians. In particular, we will use these reference points to envision a new kind of online educational experience beyond e-learning, one that takes up the very platforms and applications designed for learning and pirates them, rendering them inoperative in order to cultivate an experimental space whose outcomes cannot be determined in advance by the economic operationalism of the metaphysics of learning. Instead, we will offer an alternative, paradoxical space-time pataphysical machine of studioing that can be made common through postdigital piracy. Throughout we will make reference to Studio_0.0 mentioned above, which will act as a germinal resource for describing what education might look like and feel like in an online environment that challenges the metaphysics of learning while still preserving the potentiality of studenthood (as an educational life of study). It is our wager that this experiment can act as an exception to the metaphysical laws of learning (learnification), becoming a singularity or exception that can inspire other forms of study within the pataphysically blurry space-time of postdigital higher education.

And in the end, perhaps another university can become possible: a pataphysical university. Such universities can be absurdist, as with Walter Benjamin’s playfully imaginative University of Muri in which all the buildings are made of chocolate and newly acquired library books include titles such as Jewish Army Chaplain and Wood Imp and (the classic) The Easter Egg: Its Advantages and Dangers (Benjamin 2012, 243). Or we can think of the College of Pataphysics with its absurd rituals, parodic reverence, and esoteric hierarchies (as well as its phynancial fees). Although extreme, both cases demonstrate an attempt to profane the university and its romantic if not sacred standing among public institutions. In addition to these tongue-and-cheek examples, there are now many calls for
various spin-offs of the colonialist, anti-Black first-world university model, including the third-world university (La Paperson 2017) and the abolition university (Meyerhoff, 2019) as well as parainstitutions such as Caitlin Cherry’s Dark Study program. We stand in solidarity with these calls, but would also argue that the pataphysics of the university we will highlight in this book is not simply another addition to the list. Instead, a pataphysical dimension underlies and informs all these other variants insofar as they are *imaginary solutions*. Imaginary does not mean impossible. Indeed, flashes of such universities are immanent to the present moment. Imaginary in this case means that they take imagination to recognize, hold onto, use, and theorize. They take imagination to envision and experiment with (in often times fugitive, illicit, and/or reckless ways that fundamentally challenge probabilities and modulations). As such, the pataphysics of studioing and studying should be thought of not as supplements of existing calls for a reconstructed university but rather as the first step (or leap) into another educational dimension out of which an educational multiverse (one that is not defined solely by the metaphysics of learning) can become actuated.