

## In defence of fluff: or, why we refuse to let our research save the world

### ABSTRACT

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The paper starts from the claim that research has become highly serious business, which it characterises as 'stuff'. It analyses the concerns it takes up, the good/s it offers, and the claims it makes or are made for it. It notes the current context of regulation or research and the responses these call forth, in the form of markers of quality. It argues, however, that the refinement of these markers and the extension of the scope of their application in a globalising research industry, has potentially negative impacts on academics in many parts of the world, and thus undermines attempts to pursue some of its concerns. It not only argues for, but seeks to embody, an approach to research which deliberately problematises and challenges common practices for claiming to offer truth and to direct practice. In short, the paper argues for a 'lighter', more modest approach to research, which it characterises as 'fluff'.

Research has become such serious business. Saving the world, in fact.

If this sounds like an unlikely proposition, go back to the RQF and the notion of impact. Impact: how much effect it had – not on scholarship, or academic debate but the 'real world'. And it remains in the new Rudd ERA.

Of course, research is not alone in such serious ambitions. Policy seems to share the same goal. It doesn't take much time to track down some most extraordinary claims for, say 'partnerships' policies – from promoting optimal child development, through saving threatened species of cockatoo to solving water shortages in Africa (one of us has given a critical survey of such policies and their claims in a paper from an earlier AARE paper).

Like these policies, much research in social sciences, particularly, education, identifies marginalised groups of individuals, and designs 'help' solutions that 'emancipate', 'liberate', 'empower'. Luke, for instance, argues that critical discourse analysis has 'the productive potential to capture, describe, and critique a broader range of normative orders of discourse, including those that construct and transform knowledge and power relations in productive, equitable, and enfranchising ways' (p. 106). These 'help' or 'transformative' solutions often articulate the injustices, suggest improvements, argue for equalising opportunities, call for transformations in society and so on, which reflect the idealism of the Enlightenment as well as a quest for cost-efficient progress in a neo-liberal, post-Fordist era. Such research takes the position of the voice for the oppressed and for those who have been silenced. By

M Vick. Partnership in teacher education: historical perspectives on recent rhetoric. AARE 2006 – paper VIC06146.

Luke, A. (2002). Beyond science and ideology critique: developments in critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 22, 96-110.

‘theorising’ who needs ‘help’ and what ‘help’ is ‘helpful’, and by drawing from ‘helpful’ evidence of ‘what helps’ from other ‘helpful’ research, it claims the capacity to express the voice of those who may not have the social capital to enter into a dialogue with policy makers and scientists. In so doing, research presents ‘these’ people as an issue to ‘help’, as a ‘case’ to study, as ‘subjects’ to theorize, along with ‘narratives’ to analyse, and opinions to measure and evaluate.

Thinking about research as this sort of serious business also raises questions about how the ways research seeks to correct, reform and to do good, simultaneously enable and undermine its capacity to save the world. On one level, the contemporary neo-liberal research regime demands research that can be quantified and measured and tied to tangible outcomes. On another, the serious business of research is also precisely that – a serious business – a globalised industry whose economic imperatives entail the capacity to distract, detract, and disrupt the serious business of saving the world.

Such high seriousness – such high stakes. We’d better get it right. We’d better knuckle down to the task.

*In April 2008, the education postgraduate students at JCU mounted what they called an Educarnival for the undergraduates, under the slogan ‘In Happy Horse we trust’.*

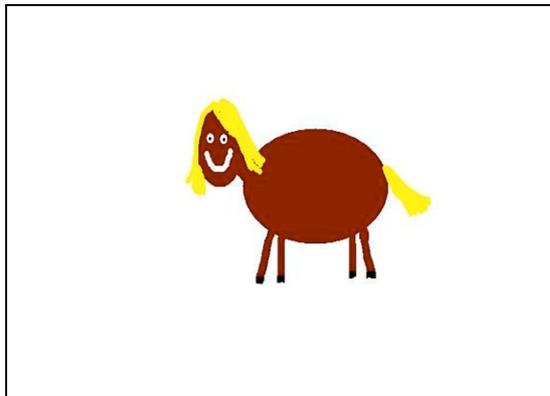


Figure 1: Happy Horse; JCU Education Postgraduate students, April 2008

*I (Vick) emailed them my thanks and (an) appreciation:*

It was light, insubstantial, trivial, fun... actually totally unnecessary – a non-determined, not required activity. You didn’t have to do it. It’s hard to work out which heading to put it under in your CVs. (‘designed a happy horse logo’; ‘came up with slogan “in happy horse we trust”’ – they’re not going to get you a lectureship).

But you did it.

And in doing it (and here, indulge my penchant for interpretive excess) you actually, practically, built community, modelled generosity. You modelled the practice of the *unnecessary* – of the ‘over and above’. That’s one way to say what (I think) LKL gets at

For an interesting piece that critiques while not entirely escaping from the problems entailed in ‘helping’ – and, incidentally, relates to a later section of our paper – see the editorial for the first issue of *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, esp. p. 4.

**fluff (n.)**   
1790, variant of *floow* "wooly substance, down, nap" (1589), perhaps from Flem. *vluwe*, from Fr. *velu* "shaggy, hairy," from L. *vellus* "fleece," or L. *villus* "tuft of hair" (see *velvet*). OED suggests *fluff* as "an onomatopoeic modification" of *floow*, "imitating the action of puffing away some light substance." The verb meaning "to shake into a soft mass" is first attested 1885. Slang *bit of fluff* "young woman" is from 1903.

with her 'discourse of love'. And of 'fluff'. (email: Vick to Fleming, Navin, Maley & Halbert, 5 April 2008).

*Talking of fluff: there's a Milan Kundera: novel The Joke. In which Kundera talks about 'long march' understandings of history (which, here, I think we can translate as 'understandings of research') - he's writing in Stalinist eastern Europe and the communist sense of the ongoing struggle for proletarian victory over capital for the liberation of humankind). 'Long march' research is research that sees itself as part of the Grand Plan for Saving the World.*

Kundera, M. (1993) *The Joke*. NY: Harper.

That sense of the long march, it seems, underpins how we (collectively, culturally) normalize education. Belgian historian of education Marc Depaepe among others, and following Foucault, talks about the 'educationalising' of life – turning the whole of life into the serious business of looking for teachable moments – and its counterpart and corollary, the endless quest for self improvement.

Depaepe, M. (1998). Educationalisation: a key concept in understanding the basic processes in the history of Western education. *History of Education Review* 27(2) 16-28.

In contrast to what we have called fluff (and to stop worrying about binaries for a moment), we might call this approach the concern with *stuff*. 'Long March' research. The relentless and ruthless pursuit of seriousness – the insistence that our research contributes to the salvation of the planet. *Earnestness*.

Don't get us wrong. We're not against reading a lot, thinking hard, analysing and arguing rigorously. We're not at all against research that has potential 'value'. (In our own ways, we both do [this kind of] stuff ourselves.). But we think we should take ourselves with a grain of salt. Not thinking of ourselves (and we don't mean just us – Lim and Vick) more highly (or seriously) than we ought (that's from *the bible*). Recognising our own contingency, holding ourselves with a degree of irony (that's from *my* [Vick's] bible – Rorty's wonderful *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*).

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, NY: CUP

So, without sounding too serious, this is the context in which we saw Educarnival and its wonderfully irreverent symbol, happy horse:

Celebration. Generosity. (love, even!) Fun. Music. T-shirts. Food. The works. And all that under a banner that was not about saving the world, not about being serious, not about constructing a smarter strategy for using smartboard or point 7 of the professional standards. It wasn't even *about* 'being a teacher' or 'constructing a professional identity'. But it embodied – without talking about – a mode of professionalism, and a form of professional identity. And, what's more *that* mode of professionalism and form of professional identity wasn't limited to -- did disrupt -- hegemonic discourses of education, professionalism etc. (email: Vick to Fleming, Navin, Maley & Halbert, 5 April 2008)

One of the students (ir)responsible for Happy Horse and Educarnival replied in kind:

I think it's great that happy horse was a completely detached icon of educarnival and

that all happy's frivolity did cut through hegemonic practices, by for instance not using 'discovery' or an image of a ship and having the mix of 'performances' from students and staff. (email: Halbert to Vick, 5 April 2008)

Well. Enough of this frivolity. Let's get down to business.

The remainder of the paper is a mixture of reflection on and argument about research – about aspects of its organisation as a social and economic/business practice, about the policing of its practices, about how we make claims about the legitimacy of those practices and about the claims we make about the value of the research that results from them. We also ask whether the foundations of such 'stuff' are sufficiently solid to warrant coupling it to such ambitions to advance good causes, and indeed, whether its claims to being 'stuff' can in fact be sustained. Finally, we suggest that even the attempt to pursue such stuff might be riddled with contradictions, by considering its impact on substantial parts of the world it appears to be seeking to save.

In writing this paper, we have been acutely aware of what research looks like, and how this paper needs to both mediate normalised research, and at the same time, stand apart, and consider whether there are other ways to play out the identity and image of research. At each stage of our conceptualisation and reconceptualisation, writing and rewriting, editing and finessing, we searched in our research for the form that fits and, also, for the mis-fits that have the capacity to inform and reform our research conduct and product. Given our concern with education research, social problematisation and the production of social justice 'products' that epitomise the notion of 'help', of saving the world, we therefore, quite intentionally, draw on Gerwitz and Cribb's plural models of justice as our framework for presenting both our research, and the research we talk about.

Gerwitz and Cribb conceptualised social justice along six dimensions: kind of concern, kind of good, kind of claim, scope of models of justice, scope of allocative principles and scope of responsibility. We concede that it might appear to be drawing a long bow to argue that these six dimensions characterise the key research questions of 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'where'. However, the very premise of this pluralistic model is that there are various ways of conceptualising, producing and representing the notion of help. We see their concerns, and their approach, as contiguous to our own, and think they offer a basis, albeit a loose, broad one, which we doubtless over-extend, to reflect on the spectrum of 'help' research.

This paper examines the manifestations and intent of the research product using three of these dimensions: kind of concern, kind of good and kind of claim. What research looks at, how research is produced and represented, we argue, are subjected to the new ethics, in the Foucauldian sense, that governs researchers' conduct in relation to themselves and others. Bernadette Baker argues that there is a 'preferred discourse on conduct' in teaching, through which teachers are examined, differentiated and judged (p. 55). Likewise, we

Gewirtz, S. & Cribb, A. (2002). Plural conceptions of social justice: implications for policy sociology. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(5), 499-509.

Baker, B. (2005). State-formation, teaching techniques, and globalization as aporia. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26(1), 45-77.

suggest, in the conduct of research, there are codes of ethics (partly written, partly unwritten) that capture, define, discipline and govern not only the practice and production of research, but also the dissemination, circulation and consumption of the knowledge that research produces.

### Kind(s) of concern

Research, we recognise, is not monolithic – even within disciplines or fields (or subdisciplines and subfields). Educational research displays a range of types of concern, manifested in aims, purposes, ends. The kind of concern in social justice, Gerwitz and Cribb argue, may be specifically about redressing the inequitable distribution of resources, or it may be more encompassing, to include the re-affirmation of marginalised cultures in the form cultural justice, and re-positioning the marginalised as decision makers in the form of associational justice. These forms of social justice are articulated explicitly and implicitly across competing, and conflicting ideological agenda in education research. Equally, the kinds of concern that are fashioned and refashioned in research have the capacity to draw ideological boundaries defining and delimiting which concerns are worthy of research. Quite intentionally, then, we adopt the (incongruous) categories, ‘fluff’ and ‘stuff’, to parody, and draw critical attention to, prevailing divisions between what research and research concerns are worthy and what are not.

What are ‘fluff’ concerns? How are these concerns positioned against and alongside ‘stuff’ concerns? We distinguish ‘fluff’ concerns by what they are concerned about, and by how they are positioned. ‘Fluff’ concerns are theoretical indulgence concerns that may not set out to identify a list of recommendations and strategies to address the specific social/educational problem from which the *research* problem derives. However, like stuff, fluff might also present a strategic intent to ‘help’, to ‘save the world’. But for fluff, transformation begins in the shifting of the mind, and the elaboration and refinement of the abstract. As such, it may be more preoccupied with intellectual *play* than with intellectual – and social – *work*. What ‘fluff’ concerns contribute might be like teachers’ work, of which Connell notes that whilst ‘a great deal of work is done... this work does not produce any things’. So, while the sort of research we are characterising as fluff might not provide programmatic solutions or direct people what they should do about particular problems, it might, however, pose provocative and plausible questions that suggest possible directions for, and implore, reflection, and offer insights that refine particular understandings of particular knowledges.

‘Fluff’ concerns, we suggest, are also concerns that are peripheral to what is (construed to be) important in a particular context and time. Take, for instance, the dozen special interest groups of AARE:

- Assessment and Measurement
- Distributed Learning Environment and Multicultural Issues
- Doctoral Education Research
- Early Childhood
- Educational Leadership and Management

c.f., Sinclair, M. (2002). Social justice in education in Australia, c. 1983-1996. *History of Education Review*, 31(2), 74-86.

We weren't able to find much literature that uses either of these categories, but Colin Lankshear drew our attention to a paper of his which talks about stuff (The stuff of New Literacies, Mary Lou Fulton Symposium, 2007; we found it at [www.geocities.com/c.lankshear/stuff.pdf](http://www.geocities.com/c.lankshear/stuff.pdf)) although he uses the term rather differently, to refer to the ‘substance’ of things, whereas we use it more in the sense of ‘self important’, with an inflated sense of its own worth.

Connell, R.W. (1985). *Teachers' Work*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, p. 70.

Educational Philosophy and Theory  
Gender and Sexualities  
Health and Physical Education  
Information and Communication Technology  
Motivation and Learning  
Sociocultural and Activity Theory  
Social Justice

The existence of such collectivities as SIGs, and of individual SIGs themselves, have complex histories in which their significances have differed across groups and across time. However, we suggest, they have come to represent the curriculum of education research: the structuring of whole conferences around SIGs implicitly, if not explicitly, frames, regulates and imposes a structure of defining relevance and value in research. Effectively, what the existence and this use of SIGs asks, and answers is, ‘What kind of concern is of *greater* concern?’ These groups represent the kinds of concern that are considered worthy of *special interest*. This, we think, occurs whether the interest group reflects dominant research interests and paradigms (critical, qualitative research) or currently more marginalised interests, where ‘special’ has signalled a need to defend (implicitly important) territory from attack and further marginalisation. The net effect, we suggest, is to establish the worth of some kinds of concern at the expense of others<sup>[A1]</sup>.

This seems curiously at odds with a point Luke made a few years ago:

Yet new times may require an expanded research agenda, one that focuses not just on the suppression of diasporic identities by dominant classes. Needed is one that engages with new textual configurations, one that de-reifies concepts of culture, and explores new definitions not only of discourse, but as well of language as necessarily blended, multiglossic, and transcultural. This will require that linguists and sociologists alike question the essentialist symmetries between language, culture, and nation that we continue to take for granted. It also indicates that a nonessentialist focus on blended forms of local “social cognition” (van Dijk, 1993), “cultural models” (Gee, 1999) and “members’ resources” (Fairclough, 1992) may offer key insights into the “glocalized” (Robertson, 1992) uptake and use of transnational flows of discourses, images, and texts.

Another way in which (some) kinds of research concerns are established as worthy – important – substantial – is through the claims about the seriousness (depth, profundity) of the knowledge they (seek to) produce. Thus, for instance, there is a widely shared (and promoted, as in the induction kit for novice academic researchers by Boden, Kenway and Epstein) that important concerns warrant research that aims to ‘tackle *fundamental* <sup>[A2]</sup> questions’ and to gain a ‘*deeper* understanding’, and that therefore requires explicit *theorisation* of the research problem.

*But stop for just a minute. Where’s the sort of thing that Erica McWilliam did in her sparkly *Surviving Best Practice*. There also*

Luke, Beyond science and ideology critique.

Boden, R., Kenway, J. & Epstein, B. (2005). *Getting Started on Research*. London: Sage.

McWilliam, E. (2002). *Surviving best practice*. Sydney: UNSW Press

*doesn't seem to be much room for the sort of thing Rorty did in Contingency, either. But perhaps that doesn't matter. They were, in the language we used earlier, probably fluff rather than stuff. After all, Erica didn't have footnotes and references, so perhaps it wasn't serious. And Rorty based at least the first part of Contingency (the section about contingency, in fact), on a Nabakov novel... A novel!... That's not either very serious, surely, or very scientific, certainly. (But we haven't got to the bit about science, yet, so we'd better hold off on this point.)*

## **Kind(s) of good**

Research offers a variety of kinds of good, and of kinds of goods.

Some research is concerned principally simply with generating knowledge, with no explicit or immediate purpose beyond itself – what we might think of, with apologies to Veblen, as conspicuous intellectual activity. Other research is largely concerned with showing what's wrong. With critique. With identification and analysis of problems. And yet a third type of research tells us what we should do.

An aside: We don't know, of course, if you've read Rose's discussion of Irigaray's way of writing as an ongoing asking of questions that are not designed for answering, and, if you have, what you thought of it, but we quite like it for the way it problematises work that aims at producing certainties to tell others.

Rose, G. (2003). A body of questions, in M. Pryke, G. Rose & S. Whatmore (eds), *Using social theory: thinking through research* (pp. 47-64). London: SAGE in association with The Open University.

Each of these – knowing something, recognising and understanding how something is not working out well for some people or our environment, and knowing how we might respond – can be seen as a Good Thing, a form of good. We might pause to ask what kinds of goods each of these produces, in the forms of knowledge, orientation and capacity.

At the most modest level, we might want to claim that each of these adds to the sum total of knowledge. Such a claim is, however, contestable. Because a research good/product is produced, does not necessarily mean that it does 'add' – or at least in any significant or substantial way (even on the most modest of scales). Certainly, materially, it does add: one more paper, one more presentation, one more book, one more item on the database. However, what it 'adds' to the sum total of knowledge is neither the same for all outputs/goods, nor a certainty. Some research is cited more than others, some research remains for a long time uncited or cited in places that do not hold research currency within current hegemonic formations of research fields. So, the kind of good a research good/product can be, and can do, is contingent on where the research is situated, and how it is positioned in relationship to both its immediate context and the broader context of prevailing research interests and norms – to other goods in the economy of knowledge.

Thinking about research in terms of goods as well as good -- in terms of a research economy – lets us notice how the range of research goods is

organised on various levels, pitted against and aligned with varying purposes, but also varying forms and degrees of prestige – high status journals and publishing houses, theoretical as against ‘merely’ descriptive research, types of research grants (contracts and tenders as against ACGs), work for academic audiences as against work for professional practitioners, and so on.

### Kind(s) of claims

Even though these types or dimensions of research and the good/s they produce are quite disparate, they share one important feature: a concern for truth. Even work that can hardly be imagined to make a difference to the world we live in (history of education, for instance) is concerned with the truth.

Truth is mediated by the deployment of theory. Thus, Boden, Kenway and Epstein argue that ‘Research without a theoretical framework is description and does not qualify as academic research or as a contribution to knowledge’ (p. 40). Theory is not only positioned as imperative to produce knowledge of intellectual and social merit, but the absence of it denounces its status as knowledge. To make a claim that is recognised as ‘valid’, the production of the claims adheres and regulates itself to the conditions of what Petersen refers to as ‘academicity’. The kind of claim of academicity is positioned against the kind of claim by other knowledge producers, specifically politicians, journalists, laymen (often research subjects). The process of subjectification by which we take on and enact an ‘academic researcher’ identity involves making and marking the particular kinds of claim about our work: as ‘measured’, ‘rigorous’, ‘objective’, ‘critical’, ‘theorised’, ‘empirical’. The contrast however, between the kind of claims by academics and non-academics is on the one hand diminished with the increasing interpenetration of the discourses we/they use, and on the other, differentiated by an increasing regulation of the conditions of making true claims. This process of increasing scientific differentiation is evident by greater impositions on choice of theory, methodology and evidence.

At the same time, research is judged on the basis of its theoretical choices (with ‘rival’ theoretical camps loud in their dismissal of others’ approaches) and, within a given ‘camp’, measured by how accurately it adheres to the integrity of its theoretical framework. Elias’s concern about theoretical fanaticism seems pertinent here:

Scientifically thinking groups are generally groups which criticize or reject the dominant and commonly accepted ideas of their society, even when these are upheld by authorities, for they have found that they do not correspond to the observable facts. In other words, scientists are destroyers of myths. By factual observation, they endeavour to replace myths, religious ideas, metaphysical speculations and all unproven images of natural processes with theories – testable, verifiable and correctable by factual observation. Science’s task of hunting down myths and exposing general

Boden, Kenway & Epstein, *Getting Started on Research*.

Petersen, E. B. (2007). Negotiating academicity: postgraduate research supervision as category boundary work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4), 475-487.

Elias, N. (1970). *What is Sociology?* Oxford: Blackwell.

beliefs as unfounded in fact will never be accomplished. For both within and beyond groups of scientific specialists, people are always turning scientific theories into belief systems. They extend the theories and use them in ways divorced from the theoretically directed of investigation of facts. (p. 52)

Despite their claims to the pursuit of intellectual values such as rigour and theoretical sophistication, the deployment of these discourses of truth can be paralleled to the production of machines. For instance, in marking time along production nomenclature, Ford and post-Ford with theoretical epochs, of structuralism and poststructuralism, and on a product level, the principal flow of knowledge is the production of texts – journals, books, textbooks, conference proceedings, and so on; the conditions of how claims are made and represented cannot be isolated from economic imperatives. As in the production of cars with a new and improved model each year, the production of claims is new and improved, with post-structuralism often represented as having greater validity than structuralism. For instance, the theorisation of power as unidirectional, is (often seen as) less sophisticated than its theorisation as multidirectional, fluid, amorphous. While an analysis may embrace *a* theoretical framework assiduously, it may not fit with the epistemological moment and trend. The elaboration and refinement of knowledge involves redefining the boundary of ‘validity’, contesting what knowledge and theoretical frameworks are ‘invalid’ or ‘obsolete’, like a car model. Using a theoretical framework that fits with theoretical epoch and moment, is contingent not on how research is performed, but also where it is performed (site of publications), and for whom it is performed (theoretical and ideological positions of reviewers). Equally, methodology that involves hybridity, inter-disciplinary or mixing quantitative and qualitative methods is also positioned to be more sophisticated in the kind of claims they make and possibly, closer to ‘truth’ claims. Drawing on research that is contemporary, particularly, in the recent five years, also adds to the validity of the knowledge, as if knowledge has a used by date like cheese and milk. Equally, the sophistication in drawing links between research that is contemporary with ‘classic’ canons of knowledge also adds to the rigour of the knowledge.

Whether we’re interested in truth, in railing against how things are, or in changing the world, then, we need to be confident we have some grip on reality and truth.

### *Enter Methodology*

(We wondered whether to put this paragraph in the previous section, as one form or dimension of research. Placed there, we wrote it thus): Some research is concerned with methodology. (Not everyone would, in fact, call methodological work ‘research’, but we think it has the hallmarks of research broadly considered – almost as a branch of epistemological research.) That gets closer to the pursuit of seriousness because, at its heart, it is about how we can establish the truth. Even methodological work that informs research that eschews any strong notion of truth is concerned to establish the

legitimacy – the sense in which it can be said to be true – of that research. And here, perhaps we might think of Bronwyn Davies’ work on collective memory as a means to explore questions of subjectification: her work clearly argues a case for its own credibility and legitimacy, based, in part on the theorising of its objects and subjects of knowledge and of the relations between them.

So let’s look at some of the claims of and for methodology. And we won’t be too discriminatory – we’re happy to be quite inclusive. (And again, in case you think we’re just taking cheap shots at others, [some of] these are our own methods, too – we’re as much under fire, under interrogation, as anyone else.) Documentary research. Surveys. Tests. Structured, semi structured and unstructured interviews. Observation. Even mixed methods. All methods for generating data, each with their own rules for ensuring credibility of data. That is, truth, to some degree. Rasch analysis. Structural equation modelling. Descriptive statistics. Discourse analysis. *Critical* discourse analysis. Narrative analysis. Content analysis. Etc. All methods for processing data, each with their own rules for ensuring credibility of data.

*There is a problem with truth, though.* Research products that maintain and represent the integrity of currently accepted theoretical and methodological frameworks are representative of technologies for the production of truth, but do not represent ‘truth’ beyond those technologies.

Whatever, the problems with truth (and truth itself has become such an unfashionable word – it’s easier to get away with talking about ‘credibility’, or more technical terms such as ‘validity’) we still (collectively and individually, in so far as we take up the culture of research as our own) want our work to manifest the markers of quality. These include, internally to our research, the demonstration of methodological rigour &/or integrity. They also include demonstrated knowledge of and capacity to manipulate the apparatus of scholarship -- to quote and reference (not in comment boxes in the way we’ve done here) in ‘appropriate’ manner (APA, Harvard) the ‘appropriate’ literature. Adherence to word limit. Formatting conventions. Appropriate ‘voice’ for the genre (knowing when ‘first person’ is OK). One of (what we find) the more interesting and strange markers of research quality, manifested in the capacity to demonstrate ‘proper’ ‘objectivity’ in research, even in work that is avowedly not ‘objective’, is the deferral of critique from authors to the research itself, as though the research, or the research artefact (the book, the paper) were themselves subjects with a life of their own, making claims of themselves and on their own behalf. Externally, markers include such things as refereed status, and citation rates and impact factors – not very widely used in our fields – yet – but surely heading our way. And, of course, in recent years, in Australia, ‘the DEST list’.

Thus, a paper such as this, while embodying some of the current expectations of academic discourse, and its procedures for establishing its truths, also sits outside of, and transgresses those procedures and the boundaries they describe (count the errors in grammar; the switches in font, the mix of voices and tones, the apparent disregard if not disdain for a range of conventions). Yet

Davies, B. (2000). *A Body of Writing, 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press; c.f., Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2005). Feminism/ Poststructuralism, in B. Somekh & C. Lewin (eds), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp. 318-325). London: Sage.

Fairly clearly, this argument comes straight from Foucault; e.g., Foucault, M. (1976) *History of Sexuality, volume 1*. London: Allen Lane.

(arguably), it still falls within the sphere of normative communicative products.

### **The regulation of research**

The production of research and its conformity to the rules of conforming to criteria of worth, and the generation of appropriate goods (in both senses) is intensively and extensively regulated – externally (by governments), collectively by ourselves both through our institutions (these overlap with government), and individually by many, of not all of us, as we seek to demonstrate our worth to ourselves and our peers, and as we review (and judge) each other’s work.

Thus, we think we can detect pressures to conform to such definitions of worth (although we haven’t done the empirical work, let alone the theorising to give it real value, to demonstrate it) in the seemingly shrinking number of researchers who nervously tick the ‘pure basic’ box on their funding applications, or in diminishing numbers who can be traced in the ghosts of conferences past presenting such work. Certainly, we’d want to suggest that the increasingly widespread use of SIGs to structure peak academic research conferences (BERA, AERA and ERA, as well as AARE) attests to the growing pressure to ensure that our work ‘fits’ within such normalised definition of what is worthy of researching.

We are confident, from reading Petersen’s discussion, that research supervision involves ‘category boundary work’, in which the discursive practices of academic work tacitly and explicitly negotiate and legitimise power and status differentials between research supervisors and supervisees. Similarly, we suggest that while discursively constituted practices of ‘objectivity’ and ‘scientific rigour’ are historically contested, extensive boundary work is enacted in challenging (or not) how research is performed.

The ‘worthiness’ of research is regulated (disciplined might be a better word, here) externally (i.e., externally to us as a ‘research community’) in a number of ways (as most of you will know as well as we do). At the level of government, this occurs through the increasing proliferation and strength of links between research and its application by industry and government, conceptualised (in the case of government) around ‘evidence based policy/practice’, by the encouragement if not privileging of funding applications that address ‘needs’ of industry/government, and by the increasing pressure on universities to seek more of their research funding directly from industry/government in ways that strongly direct the purposes, methods, even outcomes and ‘ownership’ of the research. The ‘old’ scheme of core research funding for universities on the basis of publication in a very selective range of sites (certain publishers, certain journals), the previous government’s move to introduce the RQF and the new ERA all shared a commitment to find procedures for regulating what research we engaged in on the basis of providing financial capacity to keep researching – a strategy which then flowed down to and through each university in its distribution of research resources to different disciplines and areas of research. Institutionally

Petersen, Negotiating  
academicity

This tendency has been widely critiqued from a number of positions; see, for instance, Lather, P. (2004). This is your father's paradigm: government intrusion and the case of qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(1) 15-34.

(at least at our university), the regulation of research is reinforced, under conditions of resource-scarcity, by such procedures as the requirement that a paper be accepted as a condition of receiving funding to attend such conferences.

This links back into the issue of SIGs and what research is of worth. As we've recognised already, of course, there is no uniformity across or even within these groups. But they do share commitments to question, to suggest or to recommend explicit strategies or solutions. Work within each of these groups proceeds from widely shared understandings of the various phases of *problem-solving*, from problem identification to strategies formulation. Work within each of these groups proceeds from widely shared understandings of the various phases of *problem-solving*, from problem identification to strategies formulation. Moreover, research design, raw materials and product are all assessed, graded and scored, and in differentiated markets structured not only by disciplines by such cherished binaries as quantitative and qualitative, positivist and interpretivist, objective and subjective.

### **The work research (and the regulation of research) does**

Let's not forget the multiple levels these ways of understanding, valuing and regulating our research work at. They shape our workload. Quite concretely, if we don't get the appropriate level of research publication (the old DEST list is the measuring stick) we don't get counted as research active, and we are eligible for an increased teaching load. Downward spiral: limited publications > more teaching > less time for research > limited publications. We also don't get research funding. Not research active: no research funding. No track record: no funding.

They also shape our careers. This follows fairly simply and directly from the previous paragraph.

Less visibly, perhaps, they shape our institutions. Commonwealth funding, for instance, and the increasing pressure to secure industry/government research funding shapes the orientation and structure of such organisational developments as areas of research strength, research centres, priority research areas and the like. These impact on both organisational profiles, and the isolation and viability as researchers of researchers whose work stands outside these areas of adjudged worth.

A result of all these factors is that, it now seems to be much easier than it may have been in the past to marginalise research which falls outside established and recognised areas of research strength and worth, as these are defined both by ourselves collectively and by government and industry.

However, they have a major impact outside our immediate and national spheres of activity. Take, for instance, the issue of the increasing proliferation and refinement of markers of quality, and of the intensification of links between these markers, and institutional funding, on the one hand, and individual career wellbeing on the other. With the globalising of the

academic/research knowledge economy, these markers and their links to funding impact heavily on academics and institutions outside what we are going to call the European-North American axis.

The following email exchange illustrates the some of these issues.

[item 1] Dear Editors

Our university, like all others, puts much stress on its staff to publish. There are 3 indices to which a journal title must belong in order to elicit government subsidy for institutional research and in order for staff to get promoted. These are: ISI, IBSS and a list of local titles. (email: Morgan to Vick, 18 April 2008)

[item 2] Such journals are monopolized, of course, by very large publishing houses... They are also very expensive, and thus place heavy pressure on university budgets; clearly, this weighs especially heavily in resource-poor institutions, such as many of the universities in African nations... [Also, many] academics in countries outside the main European-American axis (and to a degree in non-English speaking European countries) find it difficult to capture the voice and style of English language academic publishing – regardless of the actual quality of the research. Further, issues of concern to many non-western nations are not of high priority in high status western journals, lie outside current mainstream western academic interests and are thus even on merit, likely to be perceived as of low relevance or value. In these ways...non Western scholars are seriously disadvantaged. (email: Vick, to Morgan, 23 April 2008)

[item 3] This whole issue of being outside the European-North American axis puts other universities in a disadvantaged position. But you see, the problem in my view is really with our government who, while advocating all sorts of things pro-Africa and anti-colonialism, still puts into its policy restrictive barriers that are directly in opposition to such anti-colonial sentiments. (email: Morgan to Vick, 24 April 2008)

c.f., e.g., Fals-Borda, O. & Mora-Osejo, L.E. (2003), Eurocentrism and its effects: a manifesto from Colombia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 1(1), 105-107.

### What is to be done?

Ironically (and definitely not accidentally) we want to (more or less) finish up by returning to ‘Happy Horse’ but in response to that most serious, and consequence laden question ‘what is to be done?’ It will come as no surprise (especially if you read the abstract) that we will not even think about trying to answer that question. We will say, though, that we thought Happy Horse, and Educarnival, over which it presided, did bring people together, remind them of the not entirely serious side of life in preservice teacher education, prompt otherwise unlikely conversations and build a general sense of good will. We liked that. We like the way Freire came to talk about love. We like the way Erica McWilliam (especially in *Surviving best practice*) opts to try to make us think about how things are going on where we work by sneaking around our seriousness with clever, witty, ironic parody that lets us see the absurdity and pretentiousness of at least some of the things we do. Concluding with the equine metaphor, we also like her reminder in her paper, ‘Post’ Haste:

If nothing else, this has been a recurrent question in revolutionary socialist writing -- perhaps the paradigmatic case of stuff -- writing that epitomised the long march approach to research -- for about a century; see, for example, Lenin, V.I. (1988). *What is to be done?* London:

Freire, P. (2005) *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Trans D. Macedo, D. Koike & A. Oliveira. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

Plodding Research and Galloping Theory, that “[g]iven that daily educational work is so absorbing and often so humorous and spontaneous, surely its writing does not have to continue in a tradition of the ponderous and predictable”. We like them because they help us to be – ever so slightly – *not so straight*. To talk ourselves a little less seriously than we sometimes otherwise catch ourselves doing. We think this helps us see things – think things -- ‘outside the square’.

Erica McWilliam (1993)  
'Post' Haste: Plodding  
Research and Galloping.  
*British Journal of Sociology  
of Education*, 14, (2), 199-  
205

## Inconclusion

*We can now confess to the last paragraph of the email with which we began:*

Thinking about educarnival and Kundera made me think of a title for a paper: ‘In defence of fluff: or, why I refuse to let my research save the world’. What a fun paper *that* would be to write and, even better, to present at AARE! (email: Vick to Fleming, Navin, Maley & Halbert, 5 April 2008)

This was indeed the ‘origin’ (although that is itself a tricky concept) of the paper. An off the cuff, incidental, light-handed (intended/wannabe) witticism of sorts.

Yet, almost as a paradigm of how fluff might work, and why it might be worth indulging, it prompted us to play. To play with writing and with the question of how one might write that eschewed the ponderous truthfulness that characterises much of our writing (again: our own, as individual researchers, and collectively as a[n imagined] community of researchers) and the desire to tell, to direct, to offer a program, a solution to some problem we have imagined affects others. And yet, in the enthusiasm we’ve generated in playing, we’ve found ourselves asking questions, teasing out our own concerns, connecting them to wider issues (from globalisation to the conditions under which we work – and the much less favourable [how’s that for an understatement] conditions in which academics in many other parts of the world work) in ways that we’ve found stimulating, productive and deeply pleasurable. Again ironically, it has promoted us to engage in the serious stuff of what we might, in the end, think of as research ethics: examining in a quite systematic and self-demanding fashion, what our research might have to offer, and what, in the process of establishing its own conditions of possibility and its own claims to be taken seriously, it does, or might do, to others.

See NHMRC. (2007).  
*National Statement on  
Ethical Conduct of Human  
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