

## Has the time come to count what counts?

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### *Introduction*

Like so many other western countries, increasing productivity and participation are central drivers of national reforms in Australia. Set against stories of a future of doom and gloom (led by an aging society) interventions are imagined that target education, training and work (National Reform Initiative Working Group, 2005). Few of these interventions are imagined without the support of some sort of research to frame the 'problems', as well as the 'solutions'. What this means then is that research in adult education, training and work will continue to be in demand, at least for the foreseeable future. Moreover, with economic downturn on the horizon, along with likely rises in unemployment, demands for further research in adult education, training and work are not likely to diminish any time soon. In short, adult education researchers have responsibility to produce 'really useful research' that can work to shape these current, and future, interventions.

However, the responsibility of producing 'useful', or 'good' research creates tensions for many researchers in adult education. On the one hand, 'good research', as far as the state is concerned, equates to 'scientific research' (Yates, 2004): an equation shared across most western countries policy, funding and decision making (OECD, 2004). Such research is based on knowable and (ac)countable world/s in response to calls for 'hard evidence'. Numbers, it seems, are 'really useful' for government policy and decision makers: for them it is clear that what is 'countable' counts. However, more than describing reality, Rose points out that 'numbers actually construct reality' (1999:212) - *so what happens when it is a 'different' reality in need of construction?* What if we imagine constructing change that points towards a more socially just society. What about making 'what counts' countable? Contemplating this idea raises questions about how researchers might operate within a climate that privileges scientific modes of research, as well as a healthy suspicion of these modes of research, without also jettisoning some hope for a different (better?) future? How might we negotiate the complexities of these tensions as well as strive to be ethical in our endeavours? These are questions I am struggling with as an early career researcher, and in this paper I suggest that a pagan approach to research offers some promise in this regard.

As my starting point, I want to stress that the desire for social justice need not be called off ... *just reconfigured*. I want to imagine research that 'counts' the world, even when the researchers

are deeply suspicious of the produce. I want to consider mimicking of 'scientific' research or quantitative methods as a parody or even a deconstructive strategy (Parker, 1997:69): through the development of 'ruses and setting the imagination to work' (Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985:61). This, I believe is a risky strategy, but one surely worth exploring.

I am calling such a proposed strategy 'a pagan approach'. The term 'pagan' is taken from Lyotard (1998) and this paper draws attention to four resonating aspects of a pagan approach to research. I present them here as 'not quite', 'ethical', 'other Others' and 'multi-paradigm'. This paper begins paper by exploring the notion of pagan that first grabbed my attention and this was the notion of it being 'not quite'. Following this initial discussion, I propose that the most salient attractions of taking a pagan stance is that it is an 'ethical' one, and implicated in this is a responsibility to others. While my initial take on a responsibility to others makes a case for pursuing social justice, next I point out a responsibility to 'other Others'. For example I look toward the other of researcher, of coherence and of method. Finally, and related to thinking about the other, I suggest that a pagan approach is a 'multi-paradigmatic' one. In all, I suggest that these four aspects constitute a promising approach to research that seeks to work productively with the complexities inherent in the contemporary environment where research must be not only 'accountable', but also innovative.

#### *A pagan approach to research*

**The concept of pagan to which I refer is drawn from Lyotard (Lyotard, 1988, 1989; Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985) and was developed around the same time that Lyotard produced his well-known work: ie, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (1984). With this understanding, a pagan approach can first be understood as 'not quite' postmodern. To be sure it has been suggested that we were never (quite) modern anyway (Latour, 1993), and it is the notion of 'not quite' that first attracted me.**

**Understanding pagan as 'not quite' postmodern' is helpful for researchers eager to resist the legitimate available approaches – even if uncertain why. For example, a pagan approach offers me (as an early career researcher) an opportunity to explore the potential and limitations of a range of orthodox approaches. A pagan approach avoids an evangelistic following of any one 'ism' and, in doing so, does not limit opportunities to see potential of others.**

I stress that I do not propose ‘paganism’, but a pagan *approach* or *position*. To take a pagan *position* to research is ‘not quite’ the wholesale uptake of a particular belief system – like a faith. Lyotard and others use the term *paganism*, but for me this conjures up ideas of a bounded set of beliefs. The etymology of ‘pagan’ is found in the late Latin word *paganus*, and means ‘country dweller’. A ‘country dweller’ is more about location or *position* than about faith-*fullness* and therefore the pagan is understood in a positional sense rather than faith-based (or not). However, a ‘position’ (pagan or otherwise) can be multiple, context dependent and not immutable to change. Importantly then, a position is understood as neither a fixed nor a singular one. A pagan approach can invest in multiple ideas (simultaneously even), hence it is multi-positional.

While I make distinction between a pagan ‘position’ and a ‘faith’, I also acknowledge that contemporary use of the term of pagan is imbued with other meanings. While ideas associated with the contemporary notion of pagan may seem akin to ‘faith’, some of these ideas also have appeal. Ideas from contemporary neo-pagans add interesting dimensions to the idea of a pagan researcher, and serve to introduce my assertion that a pagan approach to research is an ethical approach. The everyday use of pagan is more typically used to refer to those ‘not quite’ converted’ - ‘irreligious’ or ‘hedonistic’. Neo-pagans describe themselves as a broad collection offering alternatives to the ‘dogmatism of religious mainstream’ (Raymond, 2005:np), and while some might think them ignorant of religious teachings, they claim the converse (Glick 2005:np). Pagans (I?) do not care for a ‘priestly’ elite, nor care for ‘final answers to big questions’, yet importantly they (we) *do care* for others (Raymond 2005:np). This care for others, indeed acknowledging a ‘responsibility to the Other’, leads to the initial suggestion that a pagan approach is an ethical one (Usher 2000:184-185).

Aside from notions of being ‘not quite’ postmodern/modern, the aspect of a pagan approach that has most salience is that it is, despite any aspersions it may cast, an ethical stance. However, an ethical stance is more than adhering to a set of rules: *did the participants give their informed consent? are tapes and transcripts stored appropriately?... etc.* While I do not suggest that these are unimportant considerations for research, a pagan ‘responsibility for the other’ understands ethical considerations to extend beyond these questions. While there are several ‘others’ to which the pagan is responsible, a first is seen in the pursuit of justice.

Like much of Lyotard's work, pursuing justice is central and necessary (Lyotard, 1984, 1988; Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985). These just pursuits are particularly evident in his work on the pagan (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985) and the *differend* (Lyotard, 1988). For Lyotard, the issue of justice focuses on criteria for judgements. His point is that in the postmodern there are not universal criteria against which one can judge what is considered to be just: rather, there are many criteria. Importantly (and the part that appeals to me) a lack of universal criteria does not preclude efforts to seek justice – what it does mean though is that judgements made in the absence of universal criteria are localised, specific and yet open to negotiation. Moreover, any judgement made presupposes other possible judgements. Criteria are not only contestable but what might reasonably be considered just in one situation is not necessarily so in another – just for all people at all times. In short, Lyotard advocates for not only a justice of multiplicity but also a multiplicity of justices (Barron, 1992), and this is not the same as a universal justice.

Underpinning the notion of universal justice is a consensual universal humanity. Many believe that such a humanity exists and consequently Lyotard has been scorned for his 'juvenile', 'unoriginal', 'lame' and 'dangerous' ideas (Rojeck, 1998:4,13,2). While the general idea of a common humanity has its appeal, the idea has troubled others who have different readings of Lyotard than Rojeck. Readings (1992) provides an example where, as pagan, he recognises the incommensurability of the pursuit and advocates not for celebration of difference, but for acknowledgement of differences being inaccessible. For Readings, Lyotard's message is rejection of the common practice of countering an oppressive metanarrative with another, more developed or 'purer' one: a newer better model. Drawing on Lyotard, he suggests 'the question of justice cannot be resolved in terms of models' (Readings 1992:170). Hence, in response to those (like Rojeck) who might argue that pagan research is an ethical vacuum, Readings argues that pagan judgement 'allows the question of justice to be kept alive' (1992:168).

However, unlike Readings (who rejects common humanity), or Rojeck (who has already identified it), Bauman (2001a) neither fully subscribes nor totally rejects. Rather, he desires some notion of a common humanity, but not one framed in the modernist thought. Similarly others, who have been inspired by Lyotard, talk about an Idea of justice – unattainable - something that cannot be grasped, yet something worth striving

for (Barron 1992). So, aligning to some degree with Readings, Bauman and Lyotard in desiring something that I cannot imagine, I too am unwilling to call off the search.

Despite a somewhat uncomfortable realisation that I cannot 'save the world', the pursuit of (a problematic) justice echoes a pursuit for 'social justice' of my earlier work in the general fields of adult community education and community development. For me (and for many others in these fields of practice) *social* justice still constitutes a goal worth pursuing. Indeed, pursuing social justice in the contemporary socio-economic climate is more urgent than ever - yet ironically hindered by the very conditions that make it so (Abrahamson, 2004; Bauman, 2000).

However, the concept of social justice itself is not innocent. Like imagined notions of 'humanity' and 'community' (Bauman, 2001; Bryson & Mowbray, 1981; Mowbray, 2004), 'social justice' is unattainable – but this acknowledgement and absolution from the pursuit are not one of the same. Hence, a 'just' pursuit is not an easy one and those who work in fields where 'care for the other' is the *raison d'être* increasingly find themselves on the defensive (Bauman 2000:9). Bauman stresses the importance of seeking (a problematic) social justice, but goes on to lament the difficulties of the pursuit in the contemporary socio-political climate (Bauman 2000:9).

A pagan approach to research holds promise considering a further similarity shared between neo-pagans and pagan researchers. This is that both are eclectic. The neo-pagan borrows, adopts and adapts a range of beliefs and practices (Glick, 2005). Likewise, Lyotard and Thebaud concede a similar notion when they suggest that to be pagan is to recognise that 'one can play several games' (Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985:61). This is also to imply an acceptance of heterogeneity - an acceptance which itself constitutes an ethical moment (Usher 2000:171). In other words, a pagan stance might deploy a variety of strategies, even if considered partial and limited, or even unworthy in other circumstances. For example, while responsibilities for the other have largely been staged in moral and ethical discourses, Bauman suggests that these arguments typically lack resonance within the dominant contemporary discourses of western societies (2000:9). However, the pagan researcher can stage their arguments in dominant discourses – but without utopian purchase. Therefore, as pagans, we can set about counting what we believe counts. We can negotiate the complexities of the socio-

political and educational landscapes not only with epistemological understandings but also with ethical considerations.

While I have argued for a 'responsibility for the other' in regard to pursuing social justice, there are also other 'Others' for whom pagan researchers take responsibility for. The Other is not a homogenous other, rather the Other is *heterogenous*. A pagan stance then also necessitates a reflexiveness that draws attention to the other of 'method' (writing). Usher explains:

Method 'forgets' that research is writing... The 'forgetting' of writing is but an attempt to name the unnameable and say the unsayable, the attempt to account for everything and resolve all problems, to 'master' reality as it really is – and thus to fail in that responsibility to the Other which is ethics (Usher 2000:184-185).

For Usher, ethical moments precede methods (Usher, 2000:162). In my pagan effort not to forget, I am intent on remembering writing. Implicated in this remembering is an acknowledgement of the other of 'knowing' (not knowing) and of 'consistency' (multiplicity). What all this means for me is that a pagan stance to research is not nearly as occupied with 'methods' as one might anticipate. This lack is not an oversight but (following Usher) more an 'acknowledgement of the limits to methods' and moreover an 'acknowledgement of what comes before them' (2000:162). Here this is a 'not quite' innocent responsibility to heterogenous others.

A pagan approach to a research project, without an anchoring 'ism', may be a cause of anxiety for some. After all, investments in paradigmatic perspectives can help researchers select (and reject for that matter) their methods. However, the eclecticism of a pagan approach has the benefit of 'borrowing' and 'adapting' from a range of methods that are drawn from multiple paradigmatic perspectives simultaneously. For example the reflexiveness, ethical spin and epistemological understandings underpinning notions of pagan research can borrow and adapt positivist and post-positivist methods - *but without the illusions*. Borrowed and adapted not for their capacity to somehow get closer to 'the truth', but as Gergen suggests for their 'pragmatic implications' (in Hassard, 1995:135).

In this way pagan research endorses multi-paradigm research (Hassard 1995). As the name suggests, multi-paradigm research works across paradigms that may otherwise be seen as incommensurable, and in doing so offers great potential by providing 'several lenses for its analytical camera' (Hassard, 1995:88). Pagan research is not aligned with the view that paradigms are mutually exclusive. A pagan stance to research does not reject ideas outright, but rather approaches them with doubt (Burbules, 1998). This is because the pagan rejects the possibility of a 'perfect lens', and so with no 'perfect lens' the pagan is aware that they must choose among flawed choices (including the 'isms' that are subject to much critique). Pagans must choose, because *not* choosing constitutes a silencing, itself flagging further injustice (Lyotard, 1988). Nevertheless, while in traditional research it is important to 'remain faithful' to paradigmatic perspectives, multi-paradigm (and pagan) research enables researchers to produce contradictory accounts without excessive concern for internal consistencies – indeed by making interesting patterns *because of inconsistencies*. Thus, to be pagan is to anticipate and to work productively *with* multiplicity, and working productively with multiplicity means that differences are kept in play.

Refusal to be a 'faithful follower' of a particular paradigm is itself an ethical choice. To attempt to invert or replace an idea with a more preferable one is to engage in what has been termed the 'gladiator paradigm': that is, 'an approach to argumentation which insists that the truth of one position is only confirmed by the annihilation of all competing positions' (Rojeck 1998:12). Hence, even though I might somewhat agree with many critiques of various paradigms, I do not feel a need to annihilate them altogether (best leave this for the gladiators). Moreover, to annihilate competing positions would constitute further injustice. Rather, with no 'perfect' paradigm my choices are more about how I participate in the paradigmatic games, develop moves and redefine the rules. Or as Barron suggests, how I might 'match wits, or 'ruse' [...] to make experimental moves within the language games that situate us' (1992:39). So while everything (including Lyotard's thesis) might be dangerous, this is not to deny the potential of everything either – whether this presents problems or possibilities is a case of 'it depends' (Barron 1992). It is not so much about 'being right' as it is about opening spaces where educational practices, identities and possible futures might be understood differently.

## Conclusion

This paper began by briefly outlining some tensions for researchers. These tensions were between the resonating calls for 'hard evidence' and a suspicion of scientific methods, along with a desire for a socially just world. In this paper I argued that a pagan approach to research holds promise in enabling research to produce 'really useful research' that works productively with these tensions, yet at the same time retain a problematic idea of justice. What this pagan research might look like is left unexplored here, however it seems to offer promise for establishing 'truths' and yet destabilising them at the same time. Indeed, even the untenable idea of justice, to which the approach subscribes, is not beyond destabilising.

While humbled by, yet committed to, this untenable project and its responsibilities, it is worth concluding that research, and the accounts of the world it produces, do not exist in a world purged of funding bodies, institutional priorities and histories (Edwards, Clarke, Harrison, & Reeve, 2002:136). Some texts, under some conditions, have more currency than others. If we are to speak we must choose a voice in a moment where there seems a proliferation of tragic voices. We must choose among tragic voices, or remain silent. While this seems unjust, what is truly unjust is removing the possibility of speaking at all. I have argued here that a pagan approach may hold promise in such a 'righting' pursuit'. I concede that it *is* risky but, given the stakes, perhaps it is a 'necessary risk':

There is only one way to evade this risk, which is *not* to engage in an act of reading or interpretation at all (Biesta, 2001:36-37).

***So..., has the time come to dust off those 'Stats 101' text books?***

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