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Paradigm, paradox, paralysis: an epistemic process

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Abstract
The potential of the transformative capacity of education requires critique of a dominant paradigm, in order to apprehend the unconscious acceptance of capital markets as solutions to societies’ woes. We engaged with media texts as practicum which advocated carbon markets to mitigate carbon pollution: a contemporary issues in society. We found that although we critique the dominant paradigms upheld by the media texts which we chose, our engagement had the potential to reinforce the status quo. Once this paradox is evident, it precipitates a paralysis of the educative process. However, this is not an end state but the struggle to overcome the paralysis mobilises a reconsideration of the paradigm and opens new possibilities. We argue that the collision of the concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis demonstrates an epistemic process which has emancipatory possibilities.

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Paradigm, paradox, paralysis: An epistemic process

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A R T I C L E   I N F O
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A B S T R A C T
The potential of the transformative capacity of education requires critique of a dominant paradigm, in order to apprehend the unconscious acceptance of capital markets as solutions to societies’ woes. We engaged with media texts as practicum which advocated carbon markets to mitigate carbon pollution: a contemporary issues in society. We found that although we critique the dominant paradigms upheld by the media texts which we chose, our engagement had the potential to reinforce the status quo. Once this paradox is evident, it precipitates a paralysis of the educative process. However, this is not an end state but the struggle to overcome the paralysis mobilises a reconsideration of the paradigm and opens new possibilities. We argue that the collision of the concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis demonstrates an epistemic process which has emancipatory possibilities.

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1. Introduction

The issue of carbon emissions has gained prominence in the public domain and hence, served as a provocative topic for study within a new subject Social and Environmental Accounting within the Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Wollongong. The accounting major within this degree has, for a number of years, a focus on critique and the use of critical theory to reinforce the socially constructed and socially constructing nature of accounting. The reflective critique of a contemporary issue such as carbon emissions, provides opportunities for the transformative capacity of education (Dillard, 1991; Kaidonis, 2004; Thomson & Bebbington, 2004). In challenging assumptions and underpinning ideologies we initiated discussion and debate. Publically available documents, especially media texts, provide material to use as a practicum in the classroom, and demonstrate accounting in action in contemporary society (Kaidonis, 2004). Our use of media texts in this subject was consistent with providing issues which might be “relevant to the lived experience of students” (Boyce, 2004, p. 565). The accounting debate surrounding the recognition and measurement of a new economic phenomenon, rights to emit carbon, demonstrates another aspect of this contemporary issue which will impact the future lives of students as professional accountants.

The International Financial Reporting Interpretations Committee (IFRIC) prepared a draft interpretation of the accounting treatment of proposed carbon permits (Cook, 2009) which reflects the challenges within the accounting profession. The IFRIC draft interpretation D3 Emission Rights is consistent with facilitating “(t)he goal of a carbon market” (MacKenzie, 2009). In doing so, the draft brought “emissions within the frame of economic calculation by giving them a price” (MacKenzie, 2009). This demonstrates the role accounting plays in the perpetuation of market solutions, in this case, for carbon pollution. However, the draft interpretation was withdrawn because polluting companies argued that it presented a distorted picture...
as costs of pollution could decrease profit (MacKenzie, 2009). This outcome is another example of the politicisation of the standard setting process (Solomons, 1978), the role of accounting in the “politics of carbon markets” (MacKenzie, 2009) and accounting as a social and institutional practice (Miller, 1994; Potter, 2005).

The term dominant paradigm refers to constructs that are persuasive and embedded in society, in particular, the market system. Dominant paradigms are important constructs to critique in the classroom, particularly when one is conscious of the potential of the transformative capacity of education. While we support this educational potential we also believe that this process is fraught with contradictions. We refer to these contradictions as paradoxes and, that the awareness of these paradoxes, can evoke paralysis at the educational level. These concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis are explicated by applying the contemporary issue of the market for carbon emission permits as a practicum in the classroom. The practicum uses media texts and these are briefly presented in the next section to highlight the paradigm in which the issues arise. This will be followed by identifying the paradox that emerges using media texts which themselves can inform, but also can perpetuate the status quo. Once the paradox is evident, it precipitates a paralysis of the educative process. In the conclusion we argue that these three concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis are necessary processes in the pursuit of transformative change through education.

2. Paradigm

The explicit paradigm is that capital markets for carbon emission permits are the solution to reducing carbon pollution. Two media texts used in the classroom were chosen because of the timing of the publications4 and because they discussed market systems to mitigate carbon emissions. The first text is by Cubby (2008) “A Kennedy in the environment’s court” in The Sydney Morning Herald. This article also referred to Robert F Kennedy Jr’s article (see Kennedy, 2007). The second media text was by Taylor and Breusch (2008) titled “Garnaut’s emissions target: let the market rule” in The Australian Financial Review. Professor Ross Garnaut was commissioned to provide a review of climate change for the Australian government. Garnaut provided an interim report recommending an emissions trading scheme (ETS) and Taylor and Breusch (2008) drew attention to this interim report.

Briefly, Garnaut advocated a ‘cap and trade’ market for carbon emission permits granted by the government, not unlike the European Union’s (EU) trading market. The Australian government would set the limit or cap of carbon emission rights. These carbon emission permits would be traded in an Emissions Trading Market (ETS).5 Hence the market sets the price for the carbon emission permits. According to Taylor and Breusch, the challenge for regulators is both the timing and quantity of permits granted at “minimal cost” (2008, p. 1).

Kennedy also argued that free market mechanisms would offer solutions to global warming and considered the cap and trade system as “one of the most effective tools for harnessing markets to save civilization” that “would create a huge market for products and technologies” (Kennedy, 2007). Indeed “(t)he problem we have in the US, and in Australia, is that markets are not free, not as free as they should be” (Kennedy quoted in Cubby, 2008, p. 6). Kennedy (2007) believed that less government intervention, by removing hidden subsidies given to polluting industries, would enable free markets to operate.

There were two approaches to ETS which was an important criterium in the selection of these media texts as practicum. Simply put, one text advocated free markets (Kennedy, 2007) and the other advocated for some regulation of markets (Garnaut, 2008). However, both approaches did not challenge the concept of an ETS as a solution to carbon pollution and both approaches emanated from the same paradigm. Kennedy argued that “(t)here is gold in going green, and the same drive to make a buck that created global warming in the first place can now be harnessed to slow the carbon-based pollution” (Kennedy, 2007). From this paradigm the questions are about market efficiency and issues such as how to measure carbon emission permits, rather than whether these new economic instruments should exist at all. These are issues worth exploring in the classroom and pivotal in arresting the unconscious acceptance of capital markets as the panacea of societies’ woes.

The market mechanism sets the agenda and boundary (Boyle, 2004) and this is an important concept to present to students. The objective of ETS is “to bring emissions within the frame of economic calculation” (MacKenzie, 2009). Therefore, this has spawned ‘carbon accounting’ as a calculative apparatus to facilitate the ETS (Callon, 2009). This sentiment is reinforced by Kennedy (2007) who argues that “(e)fficiency, after all, means the elimination of waste – pollution is waste. . . the incapacity of the marketplace to place a proper value on an essential asset – the atmosphere”. The media texts as a practicum in the classroom provide students with ‘real world’ examples of how accounting is linked to current events. Even if these media texts, the authors they refer to and paradigms that are invoked are taken critically, the media texts themselves do more than convey a contemporary issue. The media texts, including the Rolling Stone in which the Kennedy (2007) article is published, may still uphold institutional practices and give credibility to the status quo (Kaidonis, 2004). In this case, the media allow carbon pollution reduction to be captured by the dominant paradigm. The dominant paradigm uses the market-based systems as solutions to carbon pollution, while disguising its ideology as mere pragmatism. In demonstrating how accounting is integral to carbon markets, we as educators may be reinforcing the role of accounting as a technical

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4 The media text by Cubby was dated 21 February 2008 and the media text by Taylor and Breusch was dated 29 January 2008 and the classes for the subject Social and Environmental Accounting commenced in late February 2008.

5 The Australian ETS has been referred to as a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.
instrument which accommodates and perpetuates a market mechanism. In critiquing accounting and the carbon market are we inadvertently supporting the status quo of the mainstream paradigm? Herein is the paradox.

3. Paradox

Reinforcement of the role of accounting within market mechanisms, particularly ETS, is not inevitable but can occur in subtle ways as media texts can take on an unintended authority (Schon, 1987). Instead of problematising the dominant paradigm, the issue of carbon emission permits in the public domain can in effect, maintain the status quo. The problem, as Lohmann (2009) argues, has been mistaken for the solution, that is, the market system will solve that which the market system helped to create. Therefore the idea that carbon emissions are externalities, that now need to be internalised, also constitutes a contradiction.

Kennedy (2007) relates insights from a business summit held in the US to discuss ways that big business could end the “fossil-fuel addiction”, while “in reality they had come to make money for their companies – and that may be the thing that saves us”. The advantages of “green investment” not only included corporations but “America’s economy”, “national security” and “economic independence” (Kennedy, 2007). According to Kennedy (2007) the problem is not the market, but a “distorted market run amok. A truly free market is the planet’s best friend”.

On the other hand Taylor and Breusch (2008) present a counter argument to totally free markets citing the energy industry’s concerns over the impact of minimising government constraints in a carbon market. Taylor and Breusch (2008, p. 10) argue that market freedom might mean that “governments come under community pressure to intervene . . . or to help out industries” that “find themselves in financial crisis”.

Regulatory frameworks should affect the way constituents perceive their responsibilities to society. Where markets do not operate in the best interests of society governments can impose regulation on economic activity to mitigate market failure (Gaffikin, 2008). However, Gaffikin (2008) argued that compliance with regulation is reduced to a cost/benefit decision for companies. Therefore, whether to pollute, innovate or trade permits is a business decision, which is based on “capitalism’s central economic metric . . . the “bottom line” (MacKenzie, 2009), rather than wider societal concerns or public interest. Kennedy (2007) argues that “business logic, not government intervention was driving them to cut energy costs”. The issue of government intervention, according to Garnaut, can be handled by an independent regulatory authority “rather than by a politically vulnerable government” (Taylor & Breusch, 2008, p. 10). There are two perspectives of governments and their role in regulation of business, which is a worthy discussion topic in class.

Media texts as a social construct provide opportunities where we share meaning with our students through a shared text of interpretation and knowledge in a dialogic partnership. However, there is a potential that the media text is a reification of the discussion, concepts and impressions. Further, the media texts, the authors and hence the authority these invoke, have a huge impact on the students as well as the educator. To illustrate this, the Cubby (2008) article report of RF Kennedy Jnr’s visit to Australia was newsworthy since Kennedy was known to be a compelling, passionate and persuasive advocate for the environment. Kennedy’s (2007) article in the Rolling Stone was also an attempt by the educators to access material that may be within the students’ interests. The media exposure of Garnaut’s reports (interim and final reports) have continued and may have become part of the interests of students. The ETS and related issues, even if they were problematised in class discussions, may be lost over time. Indeed the class discussions are temporal and competing paradigms may be suspended over time. Complex, contested, theoretical and ideological issues often fade into the periphery of students’ lived experiences. Paradoxically, we found that in trying to present a contemporary contested issue, as educators we could compromise the potential of the transformative capacity of the education experience. The awareness of this paradox can give rise to despair which can be overwhelming, even paralysing.

4. Paralysis

Lather (1991) and Usher (1993) argued that educators need to be conscientious of their power to influence their students. The fear of reinforcing the status quo through engagement with the dominant paradigm (Kaidonis, 2004) can lead to paralysis of the critical academic’s emancipatory quest. Educators may also influence students to reject the dominant paradigm but emancipation may not be achieved if students are “replacing one kind of dogma for another” (Kaidonis, 2004, p. 672). The fear of such student outcome can also be paralysing. However, this paralysis should not be seen as an end state. The struggle to overcome the paralysis converts the fear into momentum. This mobilises a reconsideration of contemporary issues.

Garnaut’s (2008, p. 5) suggestion to “move to practical approaches that recognise that markets operate within a political reality” reflects a hesitation or misgivings about the potential for the market to solve carbon pollution. In any event, he saw a need to “correct market failures or weaknesses” (Garnaut, 2008, p. 5). Kennedy also considered a reconsideration of the market and urged the creation of “a rational marketplace – one that serves the broader interests of our nation by unleashing the innovative power of American entrepreneurs to transform our energy economy. Done right, this transformation will

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6 This was evidenced also by one of the authors of this paper during an IUCN Academy of Environmental Law 2006 Colloquium Implementing Environmental Legislation: The Critical Role of Enforcement and Compliance at Pace University School of Law in White Plains, New York, from October 16–20, 2006.
not only curb global warming, it will create an engine of sustainable economic growth for generations” (Kennedy, 2007). Both media texts imply that markets are constructed and can be reconstructed to serve privileged interests. There is also the possibility that they could also be constructed to serve societal interests. Kennedy (2007) suggested that markets can be reshaped to be an instrument to serve civil society. Is this a rhetorical gesture or does it reflect the potential for profound change?

The prominence of carbon pollution in the public domain suggests that the boundaries of the dominant paradigm may extend to include social and environmental issues. Given that the EU ETS is at an experimental stage it opens debate by producing issues from a variety of interdisciplinary actors from the scientific, economic and political community (Callon, 2009). Kennedy argued that the inherent dualism of nature/economy needs to be re-imagined so that “(n)ature is the infrastructure of the economy” and “(t)he economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment” (Kennedy quoted in Cubby, 2008, p. 6). This invokes Andrew’s (2000) consideration of a range of conceptions of the environment, from an anthropocentric perspective to one where the environment is central. Paralysis should not be an end state. Rather, the struggle to overcome the paralysis, is what converts the inertia into momentum.

5. Conclusion

The use of paradigm, paradox and paralysis in this paper elucidates a contemporary issue, carbon emissions, as a practicum in a social and environmental accounting class. We demonstrate that as educators we are conscious of how we construct or choose texts and how these may constrain what we communicate our world to be. Notwithstanding students’ capacities, how we teach may stimulate and at the same time may quash students’ transformative and emancipatory capacities. One way to foster the transformative potential of teaching is through a dialogic approach (Thomson & Bebbington, 2004) whereby “teachers and students jointly explore, discover, and grow in consciousness” (Boyce, 2004, p. 575). When education does not question or is not conscious of its potential to reinforce the status quo, it can be oppressive. While education that enables the educator and the students to reconsider our understanding and our role in society, education also offers the potential for transformative change. This emancipatory potential is reflected not only in what we teach, but how we think about issues (Gray & Collison, 2002) and the methods used in teaching (Thomson & Bebbington, 2004).

In this paper we argue that engagement, questioning and challenging are imperative (Kaidonis, 2004) in order to apprehend the unconscious acceptance of capital markets as solutions to societies’ woes. This paper uses the concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis to highlight reflective turns in order to undermine the domination of a paradigm. We found that when these concepts emerge or indeed collide there are a number of possible responses. One response is to retreat to the beginning of the process and revisit the paradigm so that there is circular process where each stage informs the next. Another response which may be compatible with Boyce’s (2008) tangential thinking, is to allow the possibility of a profound change. If the emancipation is possible with transformative action, then this possibility must exist. Therefore we argue that the collision of the concepts of paradigm, paradox and paralysis demonstrate an epistemic process at play. This epistemic process creates the opportunity for possibilities of viewing contemporary issues, how they are envisaged, reconsidered and re-imagined, so that other understandings of knowledge and its construction can emerge. Therefore, this epistemic process has emancipatory possibilities.

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References


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