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No time to read? How precarity is shaping learning and teaching in the humanities

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Abstract

Humanities educators are frequently frustrated by students' poor engagement in reading. The contemporary student experience is characterised by disruption and precarity. Similarly, is that of teachers who work in casual employment. This discussion is located within broader conversations around the neoliberal university, but aims to make more visible ways that teaching and learning are increasingly shaped by precarity, and consequences for the humanities. It describes what precarity in higher education looks like and considers the kinds of strategies that students and their teachers are positioned to develop by virtue of engaging in education under such conditions, amid chaos, making these meaningful through the learning theory of connectivism. This discussion points to some examples of humanities-based pedagogical innovations that seek to strengthen reading skills, while also acknowledging the changing circumstances of students to point towards avenues for ongoing consideration, reflection, and innovation in the humanities.

Keywords

Precarity, casualisation, humanities, reading, connectivism, George Siemens, teaching, pedagogy

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Introduction

Through this discussion we look to enter disparate conversations around the precarity of academic staff, and student approaches to higher education within the neoliberal university, by considering how the precarity of staff *and* students is impacting how the humanities are being taught and learned. To facilitate this contribution, we use reading – as one of the key practices of humanities education – to represent humanities teaching and learning more broadly. Reading occupies a central position in the humanities – simultaneously a skillset assumed to be highly developed in the 'traditional' student (Bahrainwala, 2020: 251), and a time-intensive practice that is hindered, we argue, for staff and students alike, such that too often both arrive at the classroom door feeling less prepared than they would like to be. There are many reasons why students do not complete their assigned readings, and this discussion does not attempt to canvas them all. Rather, we focus specifically on the time-poverty and subsequent pragmatism of students, and make a comparison between these experiences of students, and the academic precariat within the neoliberal university. Indeed, we propose that the pragmatism of students in their approach to learning is perhaps reflected (although hidden) in the pragmatism of the academic precariat and their approach to teaching under precarious contracts in states of chaos. This tension between expectations of reading and circumstances of precarity enables us to articulate the similarities between the experiences of staff and students, with a view to thinking about what this might mean for teaching and learning in the humanities moving forward. Understanding the logic in these similar responses is, we believe, a necessary precursor to innovating effectively to strengthen the humanities education into the future. We therefore take a moment to establish the role of reading in the humanities, and the destabilising effects of the neoliberal university, to contextualise the focus on precarity outlined in this discussion about teaching and learning.

Reading and the humanities

Reading, for the humanities, develops understanding through deep engagement with often extensive and complex material, including the critical viewing and interpretation of a broad swathe of media texts and practices supported by engagement with scholarly texts. Further, reading is not just the act of taking in information from a page (or screen). Indeed, Judith Butler (2014: 17) ties reading to a series of critical thinking and evaluative skills and says that 'the most basic forms of public engagement demand an education in *how to read*, in history, in culture and media, in philosophy and argumentation' in order to '*find our way* with those parts of the world that present themselves to us commonly' [italics added]. To read a variety of texts, and to be able to use that reading to understand and connect with the world more broadly is, to Butler at least, a precondition of engaging with public life. Reading is also assumed to help develop empathy (Manarin, 2019: 16), to assist in becoming more comfortable with ambiguity (Roth, 2014: 97), and to 'teach us the value of getting things wrong' (Gee, 2023). Here, then, reading is not simply a 'technical' (Weller, 2010: 89) skill; reading is connection to others, and a foundation to 'imagine

being otherwise' (Roth, 2014: 96). There seems strong consensus, therefore, that reading, broadly connoting a range of practices that require considered, sustained attention to texts, is fundamental to the value of the humanities, how the fields within it are taught and learned, and what this learning contributes to the world. And yet reading as an assigned learning task is increasingly subject to the logic of 'instrumentalisation' (Aldridge, 2019: 39) for both staff *and* students, within a neoliberal context where skills and outcomes are most often tied to job-readiness or employability. In this cultural context, reading is disincentivised because 'student success is defined by' the development of skills 'required in the workplace' (Zepke, 2018: 442), rather than by 'deeper principles of critical reasoning, student agency, and discipline-specific purposes, knowledge, and values beyond employability' (Kilner et al., 2019: 120). As Kuhn et al. (2022: 3) put simply, 'reading is becoming progressively defined by *outcome* and less by experience' [italics added]. Reading thus functions as a useful prism through which to examine the experience of precarity in the humanities because while it is one of the key modes through which learning is expected to occur, a lack of reading is often the visible indicator of the pressures under which students and teachers are often working.

The neoliberal university

Precarity, in this paper, is understood in both economic and social terms. In this context we consider precarity to be a feature of neoliberalism, and indeed the neoliberal university. Neoliberalism, as Steger and Roy (2010: 37-38) explain, 'puts the production and exchange of goods at the heart of the human experience.' For universities, neoliberalism resulted in 'the intrusion of an economistic logic … that expects universities to function and be managed like corporations to increase their productivity and competitiveness' (Rogler, 2019: 63). This competitiveness is particularly important for the financial health of universities. As Craig Calhoun (Vale, 2020: 92) notes, funding regimes for universities across the world are changing: 'in most places in the world … government funding is either being cut or spread among more universities – or both of these.' As higher education expands and becomes more accessible, public universities are subsequently becoming 'focused on their financial performance' (Guthrie and Lucas, 2022: 27), as they compete for decreased funding and increasing numbers of students. One of the key institutional strategies for managing financial performance under such conditions has been to increase the number of temporary teaching contracts rather than invest in tenured or permanent positions. Streamlining teaching staff in this way creates an 'agile' workforce that can be mobilised only when needed, while also reducing the financial cost to the university. The impacts on this 'agile workforce', however, include unpredictable hours and income, and discontinuity of employment, indicators – we claim – of precarity.

This economistic logic is not only impacting the staffing of universities but is also reshaping a broader understanding of what higher education is ultimately for – to gain employment (Johnson, 2022: 36). When higher education is culturally understood and treated as an object to be acquired in service of an economic goal, rather than a process of humanistic development that is 'fundamental to a civilised society' (Johnson, 2022: 37)

(which can also lead to employment and social mobility), it reflects a narrowing of the 'national good' in economic terms to industry priorities. Indeed, as Kilner et al. (2019: 111-112) explain, the neoliberal university 'abdicates responsibility for a well-educated citizenry in favour of metrics defining the best return on investment for students and universities alike', such as employability upon graduation for students, and the commodification of research for universities. Parr and Theofilopoulou (2022: 639–659) similarly argue that the emphasis on credentialism as a marker of superior employability is linked to the view that the highest qualification results in the greatest economic output. This 'orthodox view' (2022: 641) as they call it, discriminates against individuals who, for a variety of reasons, may not have obtained the 'right' qualification, but who would nevertheless perform well in the workplace. This emphasis on 'return on investment' points to the individualising tendencies of neoliberalism. As Johnson (2022: 36) further notes in relation to the reduction of government funding for universities, 'the neoliberal argument was that higher education primarily produced a *private* benefit … higher education was no longer a social good but was a product to be sold, an asset that individuals benefited from and therefore should pay for' [italics added]. Higher education is thus individualised, with individual consumers assuming both the risk and the reward of undertaking further study. To pursue higher education is thus increasingly positioned as an economic investment, and its value thus understood in terms of *economic* benefit to the individual – one must be economically advantaged as a result of higher education in order for it to be a worthwhile undertaking. We argue that this emphasis on clearly-defined 'returns on investment', both institutionally and culturally, has ramifications for teaching and learning in universities, particularly in the way that behaviours without an immediate or tangible 'return' (such as assigned readings) are deemed a risk to the ultimate goal of employability.

Significantly, the neoliberal university is also characterised by the accessibility of higher education to increasing numbers of students, and the targeting of 'non-traditional' students for enrolment. 'Non-traditional' students – othered against the 'traditional' young, white, male, middle-class student who is unencumbered by caring responsibilities (see Bahrainwala, 2020: 251; O'Shea et al., 2017: 4-7) – come into universities that remain 'oriented' towards the traditional student (Bahrainwala, 2020: 251), with the subsequent institutional assumption that a certain level of academic literacy has already been mastered. For the Humanities, this can manifest as expectations about a shared foundation of high-level reading skills across the cohort. 'Language', as Baker et al. (2021: 4) tell us, 'is taken for granted as a "neutral" site of transferable "skills,"' and the ability to read is assumed to translate to 'academic literacy' (Baker et al., 2021: 4) across the student cohort of traditional *and* non-traditional students. It is perhaps partly from within this assumption, whether broadly recognised or not, that the frustration of academic staff towards students coming to class without having completed assigned readings emerges. For many staff in the humanities, the structure of a tutorial, seminar, or other participatory teaching approach relies upon students undertaking sometimes lengthy pre-reading in advance of class, and then building on that reading in class through discussion and analysis. And yet, we find that our expectations of students—to come to class having completed assigned readings so that we can discuss and develop key ideas from a shared

foundation—are increasingly unmet, thus impacting the ways that we, as humanities academics, teach as well as the ways that students learn. This discussion names precarity as one of the outcomes of neoliberalism, a shared experience of many students and staff, and a factor in the reduction of reading in the humanities.

When we openly acknowledge that precarity underpins contemporary education we are then forced to ask, *what does this look like?* If an unpredictable and inconsistent teaching experience is not uncommon, what does this tell us about the work that sits behind classroom experiences where teachers and students encounter each other? What would be revealed about the *reading practices of teaching staff* who are required to get up to speed with multiple courses across different institutions with minimum preparation time? What strengths emerge through the stress imposed by this, and what losses are inevitable? Fundamentally, our contribution to discourses around reading and the humanities is to claim that if we want to understand what is happening in learning today, we have to look closely at what is happening in teaching. For the remainder of this article, we thus draw out these ideas in turn. Firstly, we name the state of precarity from which increasing numbers of students and academic staff come to the learning and teaching experience. We then consider the kinds of strategies that students and their teachers are positioned to develop by virtue of engaging in education under such a state of precarity, and amid chaos, making these meaningful through the learning theory of connectivism. Finally, we draw on some examples of humanities-based pedagogical innovation that seek to strengthen reading skills, while also acknowledging the changing circumstances of students, to point towards avenues for ongoing consideration, reflection, and innovation in the contemporary humanities education.

The precarious student

'I had to work.' This is a reason offered to the authors (and perhaps the reader) countless times by students who are: explaining why they have not completed (or even started) assigned readings, requesting extensions on assignments, asking permission to leave class early, offering an apology as to why they are late or have missed class, or even articulating the difficulties of group work. These words draw into being a cohort of students who are pulled in multiple directions by competing expectations, and whose experiences of both employment and education are increasingly characterised by anxiety, disruption, and time poverty (Maher et al., 2009). To succeed within this context, students thus adopt a range of 'pragmatic' (Maher and Mitchell, 2010: 146) learning strategies in which they can maximise their grades by making strategic decisions about which learning tasks to complete, and which to avoid. This fragile orientation of students—invested in their education and yet unable to dedicate more time to their studies—poses significant challenges not only for their own education, but for the ways that tertiary educators can effectively teach their students.

Research in different cultural contexts shows that social-economic factors impact on student experiences of entering and succeeding in higher education. For example, familial income and the education level of parents influences an individual's decision to obtain a university qualification (Shaw, 1998), and parental resources impact on students' access

to college, and their experiences of admission, performance, and graduation (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013). Mettler (2014: 12) argues that far from providing 'access and opportunity,' the education system in the United States 'fosters social division.' These findings dovetail with arguments that literacy is understood as embedded in social practices, so that literacy practices in the family, as well as the school and other social settings, influences the development of literacy (Hayes et al., 2017). Wider factors that impact on the reading practices of university students are thus well developed. This discussion takes a sidelong glance to contributing factors that some argue are particular to the *precarity* experienced by many students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. For example, Walsh et al. (2021: 6) explain that 'disruption' is a key characteristic of young Australians' lives, and that many 'inhabit inherently insecure lives that are being constructed *for* them, rather than *by* them' [italics added]. By this the authors assert that students' agency to plan and execute their goals is increasingly circumscribed, as rolling crises in the global economy and national and international labour markets (Global Financial Crisis; COVID-19 pandemic) renders them reactive. Indeed, the physical threat of COVID-19 exacerbated an increasingly unstable educational experience: Hodges et al. (2020) use the term emergency remote teaching (ERT) to describe the 'temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances.' Threat – emergency – crisis. A sense of powerlessness in the face of changing macroeconomic, labour, and education trends signals the special vulnerabilities of young people, who are 'often the last to recover from economic downturn' (YACWA, 2020: 12; Walsh et al., 2021: 10). Furthermore, traditional alignments between the achievement of an educational qualification and the subsequent development of a stable and desirable career are increasingly challenged (Walsh et al., 2021: 12–15). For instance, under the competitive logics of neoliberalism, the contemporary student is exhorted to do more in addition to achieving mastery of core skills and knowledges in order to stand out to potential employers (Mathuews, 2018: 108; Walsh et al., 2021: 26), such as work experience and strategic networking (Burston, 2017: 516), and the completion of additional 'professional development certifications' (Vander Kloet and Aspenlieder, 2013: 294). And yet, sites where students commonly go for information about professional careers toll the death knell for the kinds of jobs universities have traditionally prepared graduates for (SaLemi, 2018), information that might further undermine student confidence to plan.

Sustained attention to educational achievement against delayed or as yet unknown outcomes also requires a certain level of financial stability, which increasing numbers of students do not have (see Mathuews, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017). Many students are employed casually, which can feature uncertain rostering impacting on health and wellbeing (see Gerolymou, 2022). In Australia, a joint Headspace and National Union of Students (NUS) (2016) survey conducted in 2016 found that 47.2% of female students and 35% of male students under 25 'constantly experienced financial stress while they were at university' (2016: 17). These outcomes have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, in Western Australia, '23% of all jobs lost … affected 15–19 year olds' (YACWA, 2020: 12). If students do not have predictable work patterns and predictable income, then their capacity to engage with their education is also impacted

(Mathuews, 2018: 113); as Maher et al. (2009: 23) remind us, the former is often a critical component for enabling the latter. Thus, when offered extra shifts, many students are in a difficult position –saying yes to this additional work disrupts their 'time allocation decisions' (Mathuews, 2018: 115), and their ability to study effectively. Within such circumstances, the time management or study strategies that instructors suggest to help students manage competing responsibilities may be ineffective at targeting the core issues. Students instead find their own solutions; one strategy increasingly adopted is the position of the 'pragmatic' learner, who is 'only interested in learning which is directly tied to assessable outcomes' (Maher and Mitchell, 2010: 146). In the prioritising and reprioritising of work and education, weekly assigned reading often slips down the list, as it is the most difficult and time-costly activity with the least immediate returns. As Manarin (2019: 18) explains:

> reading can be a time-consuming and risky choice for a very busy, and often risk-averse, student body. … We are asking a lot of students when we ask them to risk reading in our classes if we cannot demonstrate that reading is necessary. As Roberts and Roberts (2008, 29) note, 'reading the material may be an *unwise* use of valuable time if there are no adverse consequences' (emphasis in the original).

For some humanities students, the short-term gains of acceptable grades and the subsequent degree to follow can be prioritised over the longer-term, more intangible benefits of reading. This is stated not to demonise students and the daily decisions they make about how best to manage their competing responsibilities and desires. Rather, it is to name and acknowledge that the situation in which many students find themselves incentivises certain behaviours (strategic non-compliance of reading tasks) over others (reading compliance). We posit that for some academic teaching staff, similar judgements about the best use of resources (time and otherwise) must be made.

The precarious academic

Our lived experiences of precarious employment within academia draw our research focus together. Within the past decade, we have between us navigated sessional and fixed-term appointments at five institutions, teaching 42 different units in six fields within the humanities. Our experiences are not uncommon, yet they inevitably shape our profiles as contemporary academics. Reflecting on our experiences of precarity (Helena has since been employed in an ongoing position, while Jess continues untenured), we conclude that there are aspects of the story of academia in the neoliberal university that have not been fully explored, including the true costs of employment precarity on teaching, as well as research.

This article seeks to draw connections between the staff and student experience of precarity, while also letting go of assumptions around the 'ideal' student and indeed the 'ideal' academic. Phil Race (2014: 294) argues that 'rather than try to get students to "inhabit" the world of the academic, we need to try and inhabit *their* world' [italics added]; in this article, we suggest that *their* world and ours are more similar than has

previously been acknowledged. If precarity underpinning the student experience looks disruptive and unstable, what does precarity below the teaching experience look like?

Rosalind Gill claims that 'precariousness is one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life' (2009: 232). In Australia, where we teach, it was estimated that over 101,000 people were employed on a casual basis in the higher education industry in 2020 (Norton, 2021). To understand the impact of this figure in real terms, other reports show that casual academic staff are responsible for up to 80% of teaching in Australian universities (see Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper: February 2023; Carr et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Monash Casuals Network, 2020). This is not dissimilar to the UK, where '"atypical" teaching contracts are not included in official Higher Education Statistics Agency data' – the University and College Union indicated that in 2019, there were 71,000 teaching staff employed under such contracts (Muddiman et al., 2020: 80). These figures represent an upward trend that has been tied to decreases in government funding and implications of globalisation (Klopper and Power, 2014), among other impacts of neoliberalism.

The result of this is that more and more of the leg-work in teaching, such as tutorial preparation and delivery, marking, and even unit coordination, is contracted on an hourly basis to untenured staff, typically casual or sessional arrangements depending on the award applied, and embraced by the term casual from hereon. Many aspects of this professional experience are brutal, but this is the context in which university teaching is delivered, and there is little to encourage hope that higher education's dependence on casual staff will ease soon. Cathy Davidson (2017: 249), an advocate for transformational change in higher education, claims that 'contingent labor threatens the future of the university' in North America. Further, drawing parallels between the experiences of students and their teachers, Davidson (2017: 12) writes that for '"Generation Flux" the new normal is contingent, on-demand, part-time labor … with no benefits, no insurances, to pay expenses out of pocket, to have no promise of advancement or futurity' and that further, our students 'see this diminished form of work in the adjunct professors they encounter.'

Like their students, for academic teaching staff this leads to unpredictability of employment and income—one never knows from one semester to the next how much teaching one will have, nor what content will be expected, often being overworked and underpaid for the actual hours teaching tasks require (see Morton, 2022). In addition to this, casual staff are often obstructed from accessing research, service and leadership opportunities that are essential for developing a fully-rounded academic career (Allahyari, 2021). This separation of teaching and research stalls the career progression of early-career academics (Muddiman et al., 2020: 83) who often require a robust research program and/or consistent research outputs to be considered competitive candidates for ongoing employment.

Alongside staff working on a casual or sessional basis are academics on fixed-term contracts. This might involve some benefits such as regular income, office space, workload for administrative responsibilities, networking opportunities and research support, but lack of certainty about renewal of contract prevents confidence forming. Among other concerns, the resulting inability for casual, sessional and fixed-term

academics to predict total income makes longer-term planning almost impossible. Thus, we consider that all three scenarios are characterised by levels of precarity which is causing detrimental impacts on physical and mental wellbeing across the sector (Gill, 2009; Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Neşe Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021; Stringer et al., 2018). Precarity is pervasive in many ways, and many tenured and continuing colleagues endure anxieties caused by uncertainty. Nevertheless, we are cautious about obscuring the particular violence of employment insecurity through too broad a stroke. As previously noted in relation to the student experience, research shows that insecurity affects societal groupings of academics differently. Academic women are overrepresented in precarious employment (Stringer et al., 2018) and are more likely to experience financial instability and to work for lower pay (Lipton, 2020: 9), while age, gender and disability are factors that cause 'disproportionate levels of anxiety and stress' (Crew, 2020: 52). Teresa Crew goes as far as naming precarity a class issue (2020: 46) and suggests that further research needs to be done to explore the correlation between social class and socio-economic status, and insecure employment (2020: 55; see also Allahyari, 2021: 74).

As we have argued, this precarity can be understood in relation to neoliberal principles, wherein the logic of the market pervades areas previously outside of these requirements (Shenk, 2015), for instance calling 'into question the kind of knowledge that the humanities produce since it cannot be readily turned into practical applications, i.e., commodities' (Shumway, 2017: 8). There is also an immediacy to neoliberalism, which is in contrast to the reading and focus of the humanities. Neoliberalism requires constant productivity, competition and consumption as proof of success, whereas the humanities aims to take a broader view, of the past, present and future and to, as Stice (2019) explains, 'take a step back from the episodic feeling of everyday life.' Indeed, as Vale (2020: 95) tells us, we might consider the humanities as 'essential in the cultivation of people and of countries: so that what individuals don't get from nature, they get from the culture and cultivation provided by the Humanities.' Reading – as we have tracked throughout this paper – representing a range of practices, is central to this goal. And yet, how can a longer view or innovative perspective be offered by staff who are brought in at the last minute, to teach units they are unfamiliar with, and to which they may not return?

These questions, and indeed concerns, arise from the (lack of) time afforded to casual academics who are sometimes contracted mere days before the semester starts. This just-in-time model can leave staff without time to develop materials for their students as thoroughly as they would like to (Street et al., 2012: 6), or prevented from trialling and innovating (Leathwood and Read, 2022: 764). For instance, we know well the strategic decisions we have made to get across the main ideas of a field outside of our own specialisation to deliver a lecture. The time allotted is often well below what it takes to develop a cohesive argument, ensure that the level of material is appropriate for the students and, in some instances, meet requirements for flexible delivery such as recording a short, accompanying video. Unpaid work, rather than poor quality work, is often the result. In this scenario, repeated by untenured staff in humanities departments across universities, developing an acceptable level of content can often be prioritised over developing innovative content. This can also lead to units themselves becoming

somewhat static, inflected with the research concerns of a staff member who has long since ceased to be involved in the unit. As Meg Brayshaw (2021: 49) has bluntly explained: 'Pedagogical innovation requires institutional support,' and such support is often not forthcoming.

For humanities academics, effectiveness and innovation of teaching is inextricably linked to reading at the heart of our practice as teachers and researchers. To engage with texts closely, deeply, slowly, is where understanding is developed, where new perspectives are gleaned, and where critical arguments, about the text and about human experience, can be developed. To do our work without this kind of reading is to do an impoverished kind of research, or perhaps to experience an impoverished kind of academic career. And yet this is the situation in which increasing numbers of academics find themselves, particularly the 'academic precariat' (Salter, 2022), a situation where reading is not incentivised by valuing research for all academics. Indeed, as Muddiman et al. (2020: 82-83) explain,

> Traditionally, academics have been employed both to undertake research and to teach and supervise students, with one practice informing the other. … Casualisation in the sector now means that these two roles are often separated – with senior academic staff being 'bought out' of their teaching responsibilities in order to pursue research, and junior staff being drafted in to teach.

In his analysis of Buurma and Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive*, Joseph Steinberg (2021: 42-43) similarly emphasises the point that in the humanities 'research has historically occurred *because of* – not despite – the fact that those who conducted it spent much of their time teaching.' Thus, to separate teaching and research is to remove student learning from the process of scholarly work to the detriment of both academics and students.

Significantly, these concerns are not only expressed by the staff – Williams (2022: 107) found that 'an increase in the proportion of teaching by casual staff is found to reduce the probability of a student being "very satisfied" with the university experience.' Ironically, here the tables are turned; the impacts of precarity on learning and teaching are observed and noted with frustration by both teachers trying to teach and students trying to learn. Such findings suggest that the lack of resources, training, time and support afforded to casual staff can impact their ability to teach as effectively as they would like. In the same way, as we have shown, the lack of predictable work patterns and income can undermine students' initial intentions and aspirations for their learning experience. In the next section we consider strategies that students and teachers deploy to manage unpredictability with the view to identifying strengths in these approaches and shortfalls that need to be addressed.

Connectivism and strategies of the university precariat

We have so far outlined the precarity faced by students and academic staff and indicated that certain strategies are adopted to succeed in circumstances that prevail within and

against uncertainty and unpredictability. What we note from these strategies is that learning via sustained critical reading is not necessarily prioritised or incentivised, for either the students or staff. From this realisation, we aim to explore how teachers in the humanities *are* teaching within precarity. Through our research and critical reflective practice, we have found that the learning framework connectivism makes visible not only some of the learning and teaching strategies deployed in the classroom, but why these meet the needs of those engaged. Most pertinent to the arguments put forward in this discussion is the light connectivism throws on learning amidst chaos – from the Greek *khaos*, conjuring a dark void, which we recognise as a characteristic of precarity. In this section, we explain connectivism briefly to contextualise these ideas about chaos. We then point to some strategies used in the humanities classroom that support learning and reading within chaos and further acknowledge that some of these align with contemporary pedagogies.

Briefly, connectivism is a theory of learning explored by, among others, Carl Bereiter in 2002 and Jane Gilbert in 2005 who forecast the revolutionary impact of the digital age on learning and consequent significance of collaboration and networks (in Starkey, 2012: 24), and further conceptualised by George Siemens in 2005. Their ideas build upon and extend traditional behaviourist and constructivist theories of learning (Dunaway, 2011) by querying how teaching and learning could evolve alongside the rapid development of the information environment when knowledge was growing exponentially. For Siemens, connectivism departs from traditional learning theories through the way it considers learning as occurring externally to the person. In other words, Siemens is thinking about the impact of technology and how our learning might be reconceptualised *in relation* to technology (2005: 3). In connectivist thinking, knowledge is not transferred *or* made; rather it is distributive, emerging through connections and passing through networks of humans and artefacts, such as digital information sources (Goldie, 2016: 1065). Connectivism seeks more directly to consider how the vast expanses of information now available could be strategically *managed*, rather than *known*; because all knowledge cannot exist in any one mind, complete understanding is perhaps unachievable. Consequently, foundational to connectivism is the idea that knowing where to find information is more important than what one currently knows as an individual. Connectivism thus acknowledges the increasingly centralised role of technology in the learning process – how knowledge is gained, where it is stored, and how it is accessed. Within this framework, what matters is not so much where knowledge comes from, or how it is constructed, but how it is connected to the right people, in the right context, at the right time, and applied, thus constituting learning. Connectivism further proposes that that once some knowledge – such as specific information – serves a particular purpose, it is not necessarily retained. This reshapes core assumptions about learning: the idea that knowledge, once applied, sticks, is replaced with an understanding that centres process (the skills to seek and apply knowledge for specific purposes) rather than content, which might be more temporally limited (Leathwood and Read, 2022: 764).

We draw on connectivism in this discussion about the impacts of precarity on reading and learning in the humanities specifically to explain the purpose and appeal of some of the strategies students and teachers adopt in the contemporary learning experience. For us,

connectivism frames some of these as logical and effective responses to unavoidable and relenting pressures. These include ways of doing academic work more quickly, for specific purposes, when there is no certainty that the purpose will endure and drawing on all available sources for the distribution of knowledge, including peers and students. For our argument here, connectivism indexes the chaos that features within academic precarity where, for staff and students alike, there is a 'breakdown of predictability' (Siemens, 2005: 4). Indeed, the embracing of chaos tracked by connectivism indicates a different relationship to time. Disruption, as a constant potential, requires responsiveness and reprioritising – even more so working and studying under the pandemic – and is a staple of the precarious staff and student experience. While timetabling ostensibly assists staff and students to organise their time and to ensure that all requirements are met, the reality is that instability pervades our experiences.

Amidst such uncertainty precarious teachers in the contemporary classroom may strive to deliver on expected standards while accepting that longer-term gains will not be achieved (such as full mastery and confidence). This reality is made visible through connectivism, with Siemens stating that in the rapidly expanding information age 'action is often needed without personal learning' (2005: 3) forcing, at times, performance 'in the absence of complete understanding' (2005: 4). Siemens calls this actionable knowledge: acquired and applied for an immediate need before the learner moves on to the next challenge. Many contemporary teachers understand this dynamic. As we have shown, casual tutors are often appointed on a just-in-time basis, with minimal time to prepare content that is often new to them. The traditional 'obligation to master shelves of existing scholarship on the writers and works in question, as well as diverse theoretical traditions' (Pryor, 2021: 55-56) simply cannot be met when casual staff are under pressure to take on vast amounts of content quickly and without certainty that it will be required beyond the 12-weeks of an average semester unit. Achieving these multiple outcomes demands proficiency in acquiring and applying short-term knowledge by connecting and synthesising information from a range of sources (Siemens, 2005: 3). Recall that we have taught 42 different units in the past decade; in many cases we were not provided an opportunity to repeat a unit. Like many other academics who have been required to exercise similar flexibility, while we each have our own foundational *disciplinary* knowledge to draw on to manage these teaching loads, the particular skills to select and harness *actionable* knowledge were honed through casual teaching. This inherent understanding is applied when time constraints leave no choice but to draw on the strategic reading practises our students adopt, such as skimming and scanning, and Googling definitions or YouTube videos of key concepts rather than seeking out more complex explanations (see Smale, 2020). When time runs out and the class is imminent, gaps in preparation might be filled with classroom activities that require students to design their own questions to answer, a staple activity in the humanities classroom. While also enabling students to become more active in their own learning, such strategies also function to mitigate, to a certain extent, the uncertainty of staff who may not have had time to engage with the learning materials in the way that they would hope to through centralising what the student knows, and what the student wants to know.

At the start of the discussion, we described similar practices deployed by students (and for similar reasons) as pragmatic responses to circumstances that seem beyond their

control, strategies intended to satisfy immediate needs with longer-term considerations often delayed. For instance, when questions about reading material are raised in class, it is not uncommon for a student to volunteer that they didn't get to the reading, but to enthusiastically share recommendations for podcasts and YouTube videos that explain key concepts, resources that they are satisfied equipped them with *enough* knowledge to manage the unit's requirements without having to engage, in-depth, with the assigned readings. Of course, there are students who use such recommendations to supplement the reading that they are doing (rather than replace it) – these are the students that Roth claims we hope to be 'lucky enough' (2014: 141) to have in our classroom, thus expressing that such students are the exception, rather than the norm. Indeed, as students move through their degrees, their ability to determine which readings need to be done and which can be replaced by podcasts/other media – in other words their mobilisation of actionable knowledge – can also become more sophisticated. They increasingly know where to find the right information, and when to apply it. As Manarin (2019: 17) found, a common piece of advice that third year students would offer to first year students was 'don't do all the reading', as the cost-benefit ratio was deemed too high. Here, then, amidst the chaos of their own lives, students are employing strategies that help them to pragmatically manage their workloads, by identifying where to find information, only when absolutely needed.

There is thus a tension here – acknowledging that students are coming to class without having completed assigned readings means that teaching staff need to decide how to manage this. Strategies such as jigsawing (where students work in groups to unpack or reread sections of assigned readings and then explain their findings to the others to formulate a more complete understanding of the reading as a whole) ensure that students leave the classroom with some level of understanding. At the same time, however, these 'compensatory' strategies can also further disincentivise students from coming to class prepared (Spencer and Seymour, 2013: 191). For many of us, this becomes a difficult cycle to break. We want to encourage student attendance in our classes (providing explanations of what they do not understand and opportunities to develop their skills, as well as answering questions about assessments, and not shaming reading non-compliance), and yet we also want students to attend prepared and to be encouraged to develop capacities for sustained reading and study. This section has proposed that connectivism situates some of these tensions within chaos, and makes visible some ways that pragmatic strategies align with pedagogies that support student-centred and enquiry-based learning, especially in a digitally networked world. Innovative strategies that encourage reading in response to student precarity are being designed and implemented in humanities departments across universities. We conclude this discussion by drawing attention to some of these examples and propose that taking *staff* precarity into account might also provide a more complex picture of humanities teaching and learning for the future.

Nurturing reading in the humanities

Throughout this article, we have sought to recognise and name some stressors faced by staff and students in higher education today, and to think about what this means for the contemporary humanities education experience, particularly reading. We have suggested that

the factors that undermine intention and approaches to student learning might be similar to those that constrain, undermine, and prevent the achievement of teaching goals – time poverty, precarious work, and lack of clarity about what the future may bring. We have also suggested that some staff and students are employing strategies that enable some levels of success within these constrained parameters, strategies that enable the management of chaos and reflect a connectivist approach to knowledge. This shared precarity of staff and students is an important intervention into conversations that are already occurring around academic staff precarity, and around the reduced reading practices of students. Importantly, humanities learning design is already exploring ways to hold ground on the expectation of, quoting Peter Brooks (2014: 3) '*reading* of a careful, analytic, self-conscious kind,' while embracing new opportunities that more realistically take into account the contemporary realities for learners. Elizabeth Stice (2019), for example, has reflected on trialling only one full-length book, *Anna Karenina*, for her Humanities III unit, suggesting that this approach enabled the students to simultaneously slow down and engage more fully, while also requiring high levels of reading comprehension. N. Katherine Hayles (2010) has discussed several examples of the ways that humanities scholars have redesigned their learning activities to encompass both deep attention/close reading and hyperattention/hyperreading. Hayles' own example (2010: 77) discusses a comparison of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, an 'electronic hypertext fiction written in proprietary Storyspace software', in which students were expected to spend an equivalent amount of time with *Patchwork Girl* as they would with *Frankenstein*, and to diagram and unpack the various interrelationships and strategies offered by the online text. Drawing on both deep and hyperattention, Hayles was able to extend the students' digital literacy *alongside* their print literacy.

From the perspective of reading as a skill, Poletti et al. (2016: 235-236) note that while many teachers 'are attached to an ideal student: the student who completes all set reading prior to class, who undertakes independent research without prompting, and who is open to the distinct pleasures and challenges of reading literature from a range of historical periods and cultures,' emphasising reading resilience strategies is a more effective way to circumvent the 'anxiety, disappointment and shame' that can be tied to assigned readings that go uncompleted. To strengthen reading resilience, Poletti et al. (2016: 237; see also Smale, 2020) suggest that 'dedicated discussions of the skill of reading' and 'practical conversations about reading and its place in student learning' should occur within class time. And Maura Smale (2020) has also suggested that 'faculty and staff can advocate for providing additional reading support on our campuses,' in addition to the usual writing support that can be found.

While these are certainly invigorating and inspiring strategies, we recall Brayshaw's (2021: 49) statement that 'pedagogical innovation requires institutional support.' Implementing new and effective learning activities which may need to be researched, conceptualised, designed, and implemented well before the semester begins, is undermined by the neoliberal institution's reliance on casual staff. Taken together, then, we suggest that humanities departments are the site of constraint *and* innovation, and that conversations about the future of the discipline, and about reading practices, cannot take place without acknowledgement of both realities. The precarity of staff and students *does*

impact the ways that humanities education is approached, and there *are* innovative practices that can help students to strengthen their reading skills, and their close reading practices, in ways appropriate for contemporary contexts. We thus end this article not with a grim prediction of the loss of reading skills due to technological development and neoliberal emphases on job-readiness, nor with an optimistic view that innovation in teaching and learning is all that is needed to protect, and indeed harness, the close reading of the humanities. Rather, we point to the complex environment in which the humanities are learned and taught and suggest that we can best enhance the humanities by planning within and against the precarity that shapes higher education.

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