Diverse Dwellings "on" and "in" Mystery

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Abstract:

Practitioner self-study narratives play an important role in the engagement of Mystery, particularly in neoliberal educational contexts, which tend to prioritize rational goal-settings and answers as compared to Mystery's a-rational ways of knowing (i.e., ways beyond rational knowledge) that dwell in our Being. As two educators, we share our curricular and pedagogical dwellings "on" and "in" Mystery. This inquiry stems from our desire to create generative curricular spaces for students to explore Mystery within their Being, with the Whole of existence, and with respect to their interconnectivity to global-local contexts and currents of struggle. The study's three thematic findings are communicated via a multi-voiced text of narrative, poetic and academic writing. First, we lament the insufficient engagement of Mystery in education, while coming to know the strengths of such lament for transformative educational work. Second, we narrate our diverse dwellings "on" Mystery, which articulate our understandings and practices of Mystery. Third, we explore the value of an existential ontology of education as a means to enhance engagement in Mystery with students, within the complexity of their whole selves and the Whole of life.

Keywords: collaborative self-study; mystery; unknown; a-rational; epistemology; multiple ways of knowing; existential; ontology; neoliberalism; climate crisis; uncertainty

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Habitations diverses :
Pensant « sur » et « dans » le Mystère

Résumé :

Les récits d'auto-études des praticiens (ou practiciennes) jouent un rôle important en invitant le Mystère dans un programme d'études, particulièrement dans les contextes éducatifs néolibéraux, qui tendent à privilégier la fixation d'objectifs et de réponses rationnels au détriment des modes de connaissance « a-rationnels » (qui dépassent les modes de connaissance rationnels) qui demeurent dans notre Être. En tant que deux éducatrices, nous partageons nos « habitations » curriculaires et pédagogiques « sur » et « dans » le Mystère. Cette enquête découle de notre désir de créer des espaces pédagogiques génératifs permettant aux étudiants et étudiantes d'explorer le Mystère au sein de leur Être, avec l'Ensemble de l'existence, en tenant compte de leur interconnexion avec les contextes mondiales et locales et les luttes en cours. Les trois conclusions thématiques de l'étude sont communiquées par le biais d'un texte à plusieurs voix, composé de l'écriture narrative, poétique et analytique. Premièrement, nous déplorons l'attention insuffisante accordée au Mystère en éducation, tout en découvrant les avantages d'une telle lamentation pour un travail éducatif transformateur. Deuxièmement, nous racontons nos habitations « sur » le Mystère, tant dans nos compréhensions que dans nos pratiques. Troisièmement, nous explorons la valeur d'une ontologie existentielle de l'éducation comme moyen d'améliorer les relations des étudiants et étudiantes avec le Mystère, dans la complexité de leur Être et dans la Vie tout entière.

Mots clés : auto-étude collaborative; mystère; inconnu; a-rationnel; épistémologie; multiples façons de savoir; existentiel; ontologie; néolibéralisme; crise climatique; incertitude

Living with Mystery

Are we dwelling in Mystery,

conversing with Mystery?

Being evoked, woke

by the unknown?

Are we E N L A R G I N G

through uncertainty?

Possibly, thriving

by it?

Yes, maybe,

and also,
not?

Are we laughing with

the unknown?

Smiling from the

unknown?

Okay,

I am

s   m   i   l   i   n   g,

now :-).

Are you?

A Part of Something *SO* Much Larger

We need to turn towards and deepen our relationship with Mystery in post-secondary education. Students' existential subjectivities, explorations and understandings need inclusion in education. As global contexts exemplify being inextricably interconnected to something *SO* much larger than us, awareness of this ineffable Mystery of life and our own lives heightens. This awareness ignites Mystery's embeddedness in existence and the ultimate entangled Oneness of this unfathomable larger Whole. This awareness is further heightened through the great uncertainties of survival, exacerbated within the existential turmoil of the geo-political climate, species extinction, climate emergency, uncertainty, war, genocide, injustice, rising mental health issues, trauma and more. As alluded to above, in this paper, we are referring to Mystery (capitalized) which portrays deep philosophical, spiritual and poetic understandings of Mystery-as-such, *sui generis*. Here, Mystery surpasses all conventional boundaries and is distinguished from individual mysteries of everyday life, such as the mystery of a missing key or a who-done-it murder mystery show (i.e., mystery spelt in lower case). Within this expansive terrain, we wonder, as educators, how are we fostering generative spaces for the engagement of Mystery in our post-secondary curricular and pedagogical practices? How are we critically exploring our Mystery frames of understanding and practice?[1]

We also wonder how we are navigating these commitments amidst a widespread neoliberal reach to hyper-prioritize instrumentalism and commodification in education, where neoliberalism is defined as a political and economic policy model that endorses free-market capitalism and aims to transfer ownership, property and business from the government to the private sector (Vallier, 2022). Jones and Ball (2023) describe the complex, vast reaching tentacles of neoliberalism:

> The fundamental challenge is that neoliberalism rests upon, brings about and flourishes not simply on the basis of a set of tenets or principles, or through a set of changes in systems of delivery, or in the enactment of new forms of social relations but in and through a complex arrangement and ensemble of practices, methods, ethics, interactions and subjectivities. (p. 7)

Within such comprehensive, multi-faceted reach, we point to the impacts of neoliberal "commodification" and "instrumentalism" (Jones & Ball, 2023) on how Mystery is (re)constructed and/or (re)engaged (or not) in post-secondary education. Formulaic curricular and pedagogical practices are rooted in instrumentalist-, efficiency- and productivity-driven outcomes (Portelli & Oladi, 2018). Moreover, most philosophers of education believe that critical thinking or rationality is the aim of education (Bailin & Siegel, 2003). These practices are the antithesis of Mystery. The exploration of Mystery in education cannot be reduced to an endeavor of instrumental reasoning (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944/1989). The same is true of neoliberal constructions of student as consumer and teacher as technician (Jones & Ball, 2023; Portelli & Oladi, 2018). These simplified and commodified identities restrict the oxygen flow to human existential sensibilities, which are always

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[1] In this paper, the terms "educational practice", "practice" or "Mystery practice" refer *both* to curricular and pedagogical practices; curriculum and pedagogy inform and work in tandem with each other. In addition, see glossary definitions for the following terms: a-rational, Being, dwelling, existential subjectivity, Mystery, neoliberalism.

residing in living relation to the larger unknown, the ineffable Mystery, whether we are actively aware of these sensibilities or not.

In this paper, as two post-secondary educators, we present findings from our collaborative self-study of our understandings, experiences and practices of Mystery. Morgan explores Mystery in her commitments as a faculty member and instructor in the graduate education and teacher education programs at Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. Monika engages Mystery as an instructor in the language and liberal studies program at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. As our study shows, collaborative self-study narratives on educators' engagement of Mystery are needed alternative narratives to neoliberal plot lines, which serve to ignore, restrict and/or misconstrue Mystery and our (potential) relationship to it. Self-study accounts comprise necessary forms of grappling and awakening to create spaces of possibility, hope and flourishing "in" and "with" Mystery, amidst and despite the current uncertainties of our species, planet and humanity. Centering study of the researchers themselves, along with their practices, self-study accounts are humble yet mighty offerings as educators earnestly start from where they are—in their contexts, identities, experiences and ambiguities—while simultaneously engaging in genuine collaboration with colleagues to expand and deepen conversation and learning. Undoubtedly, these accounts, akin to our own narrative shared in this paper, relay a montage of struggle, confusion and failure, interlaced with surprise, growth and insight. Such facets of human experience are further heightened when exploring the phenomenon of Mystery and its terrain of unknowns, as our collaborative self-study illustrates.

We present three themes arising from our study. The first theme of our findings narrates our lament over the insufficient engagement of Mystery in post-secondary education. We explore this lamentation in relation to our educational practices of Mystery and the academic literature. In doing so, we strengthened our affective ways of knowing (e.g., feeling, emotion, felt-experience) which deepened our critique of neoliberalism. The second theme explores the diversity of dwellings "on" Mystery evident in both our self-study data and in the academic literature we studied. Dwelling "on" refers to the exploration of different understandings, experiences, orientations and/or practices of Mystery. We discuss this diversity as a tapestry of entranceways depicting varied but often intersecting a-rational epistemologies (i.e., those beyond rational knowledge), which we refer as Mystery practices. In the third theme, we describe our awakening to the value of an ontology of Mystery in education as a potential means to further ground and ignite experiences of dwelling "in" Mystery. Although inspired by Heidegger's idea on dwelling, that one is where one feels at home within a familiar structure and familiar sense-making practice (Heidegger, 1954/1971), we use this term to refer to experiences of residing "in" and "with" Mystery and to feeling an intrinsic part of Mystery itself. Across these findings, we illustrate how Mystery became a Subject to be in active relationship with, not an object for study. We saw how our a-rational Mystery practices brought students into meaningful relationship with their existential subjectivities and with Mystery in life-affirming ways. Further, we came to understand how removed from the fullness of life education may become when treated as existing a-part from Mystery.

Attuning to Mystery via Collaborative Self-Study

As a qualitative research methodology, self-study presents individual and dialogical meaning-making processes as interpretative, (socially) constructed, situated, subjective and partial (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Hauge, 2021). In its theoretical orientations, self-study research is guided by the ontology of the self-study researcher, the expertise of "personal practical knowledge" and a focus on "the unpacking of individual circumstances" (Craig & Goodson, 2020, p. 23). These orientations connect self-study to varied methods, such as narrative inquiry, autobiography and participatory research, such as action research (as noted by Craig & Goodson, 2020, p. 23). Teacher self-study is interested in educators' exploration, description and interpretation of their teaching practices, experiences and beliefs, with the goal of improving their curricular and pedagogical work, and offering new teaching insights (Bullock & Christou, 2009; Hauge, 2021; Louie et al., 2003).

Collaboration is often viewed as a key and/or inherent facet of self-study research (Guðjónsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2022). Collaborative self-study invites educators to co-create inquiry spaces that include dialogue, questioning and critical reflection, as well as contemplative and creative forms of engagement, to ignite multiple perspectives and rich, multi-faceted findings (Carse et al., 2022; Feldman et al., 2004; Guðjónsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2022; Louie et al., 2003).

As collaborators from different provinces, we communicated by phone, Google Docs, emails and text messages, doing so for four months, on average three to four times per week, sometimes more. We had 90-minute conversations by phone, two times per week and, at times, more. Most often, our conversations began with sharing our individual reflective work followed by joint dialogue, questions, debate and insights. These dialogic processes activated a spiral of deepening reflection and co-learning.

We engaged in a-rational processes of data gathering and reflection. As previously indicated, a-rational approaches refer to inviting what lies beyond the rational realm, such as an emotional reaction, that is not acted out for any rational purpose, for example, a situation where one jumps up and down in joy (Hursthouse, 1991). The a-rational further includes the intuitive, instinctive, spiritual, imaginal, subconscious, visionary, dream-generated, somatic and creative ways of knowing. We viewed these ways of knowing not as opposed to the rational (i.e., not as irrational), nor exclusionary of the rational, but as reaching outside and beyond the category of logical reason. Self-study data supporting our a-rational engagement included our free writes, journaling, creative and poetic writing, drawing, nature walks and processes of contemplation (such as meditation, stillness and the prosocial values of humility and patience). For instance, free-verse poetry was used to support the engagement and expression of Mystery. Poetry can often portray Mystery better than technical or academic writing due to the poet's engagement of a-rational ways of knowing (e.g., subconscious, affective or creative engagements), which are closer to the nature of Mystery and beyond the confines of instrumental reason (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1989). The philosopher Heidegger, for example, states that poetry has the capacity to stand closest to Mystery because of its ability to "unconceal" Being for the poet and/or the world (Heidegger, 1946/1971, p. 48). In our study,

Morgan's free-verse poetry, written during the self-study process, provided one source of data. Found poetry was also used by Morgan to represent and communicate study findings.

Additional data collected included meeting notes, written feedback to one another, theme-based writing, mind maps, course outlines, lecture notes and teaching logs. These types of data supported our a-rational processes and our reflections "on" Mystery (e.g., understanding, conceptualizing, practicing). Our data gathering and interpretative processes were also connected to cross-disciplinary scholarship (e.g., to educational, philosophical, spiritual/religious or literary studies) to support the critical grounding, expansion and deepening of our reflections. We drew from phenomenological and existential Continental philosophers in Europe such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel and Magrini, for instance, who address Mystery that relates to individual human beings and their conscious, existential participation in life (Critchley 1999; West, 2010).

Engaging in iterative, dialogical-interpretative processes across the study, we drew from hermeneutics and phenomenological existentialism (given their alignment with Mystery and collaborative self-study). Via hermeneutics, we sought meaning rooted in dialogue (with each other and our texts) and the creation of thick depictions of our experiences, as co-participants and researchers of the study (Friedman & Rogers, 2009; D. G. Smith, 1991). Consistent with phenomenological existentialism, we assumed a first-person, inner point of view through our existing presuppositions and situations—for example, that our consciousness has "directedness towards" the outer and inner worlds which comprise our existence in the here and now, in all its specificities of contexts, identities and experiences (Baert 2015; Cotkin 2003; Heidegger 1927/1962; Husserl, 1913/1983; Kierkegaard 1843/2004; Mohanty 2008; D. W. Smith 2013).

Consistent with our data gathering, data analyses involved an interplay of rational and a-rational reflections and a commitment to moving between the whole and the parts of the data, as understood by the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1960/2004). We drew on descriptive thematic analysis (Ho et al., 2017; Ozuem et al., 2022; Sundler et al., 2019) to provide attentiveness to our experiences, allowing insights, curiosity, questions and possibilities to surface from embodied engagements with the data. We explored questions, including the following: What is stirring in us, as we read and reflect on our experiences/data? What phrases, words and passages are we particularly drawn to? What might our observations and reflections say about how we are coming to Mystery in our educational practices? How might we conceptualize and map these observations and reflections to explore the data as a whole? This iterative process led to the identification of three main themes of findings. Each theme was then narrated through a weaving of key experiences and subsequent insights related to that theme.

A Multi-Voiced Narrative of Findings

We narrate three central themes of findings:
1. lamenting the insufficient engagement of Mystery in education;
2. diverse dwellings "on" Mystery; and
3. dwellings "in" Mystery.

These themes are relayed through a multi-voiced text of narrative, poetic and analytic writing, elucidating our research engagement with multiple ways of knowing in the collection, analysis and representation of our findings.

Lamenting the Insufficient Engagement of Mystery in Education

Lamenting the insufficient engagement of Mystery in post-secondary education was a central theme of our findings. We use the word "insufficient" to convey "not enough" or "lacking", while also including "a lack of respectful treatment and/or genuine inclusion" to our meaning of insufficiency. Here, we explore our experience and understanding of this lament, as well as the possibilities it offered to shape our practices. We begin by narrating our surprise at the strength of our lament and the openings we experienced by contemplating on and conversing from affective ways of knowing. This experience led to exploring text in the academic literature from more a-rational sources of affective, intuitive and experiential ways of knowing. Through these processes, some of our perspectives began to unfurl (around their edges) or become reframed as we moved further towards a-rational ways of being and knowing. Our ability to receive, engage and partner with Mystery grew amidst its insufficient engagement in neoliberal education. Here, we begin our narration of this theme.

Self-study conversations began with confessing and lamenting the lack of sufficient engagement of Mystery in post-secondary education, a lament that was evident in our free-writes, journals, creative expressions and meeting notes. Our written and spoken words, such as, "insufficient", "absent", "ignored", "misconstrued", "passing over", "lack of genuine inclusion" and "not taken seriously" were not solely expressions of annoyance, frustration or complaint; they were feelings of lament. The verb lament is defined as "to feel or express sorrow", to "mourn", "wail", "moan", "knell" (e.g., a warning sound) or "keen" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Sitting in surprise at such unplanned opening of lament, we woke to an existential turmoil related to Mystery's limited infusion, a disheartenment inside ourselves to which we had not previously attended. Moving into our visceral feelings of disheartenment (and away from the intellectual analysis) made our connection to Mystery, as researchers and teachers, more real and accessible.

In turn, this experience led to shaping our engagement with the academic literature. We allowed ourselves to be drawn to particular words, phrases and sentences: to feel, sense and experience our way through literature searches and readings rather than to adopt a systematic, rational, linear approach. This way of "reading" Mystery supported sensory acuity towards the fleshy, embodied impacts of the avoidance of actively addressing Mystery in education. We felt a bodily comic relief as we boldly highlighted McClay's (2022) exclamation: "Mystery gets too little respect!" (p. 141). We empathized with Papacoscta's (2008) experience of Mystery as "the most ignored, underused, or misunderstood" notion in his disciplinary context, used as "mere entertainment or as an attention grabber" (p. 5). We felt the constriction or harm of epistemological domination as we underlined Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944/1989) assertion that human beings have fallen prey to instrumental reasoning since the Enlightenment (p. 30). This was similarly experienced when reading Heidegger's (1946/1971) decry, that awe and wonder, as hands-on experiences of Mystery, have

been superseded by technological knowledge (e.g., efficiency, productivity, rationality, shallow curiosity) and armchair philosophy (e.g., abstraction, rational analysis, objectivity; p. 117). We felt Haas (2002) piercing like an arrow as he defines "false education" as that which "restricts the Mystery, inducing facts" (Chapter 2, para. 17).

Lyrical and poetic renderings of Mystery laid bare how indispensable Mystery is, further growing our awareness of the narrowing that education can inflict onto the Whole of our Being when it is engaged *a-part* from Mystery. We lingered on the stability of Mystery's pervasive existence in our lives when compared to "the coherence and beauty of a landscape [that] requires the presence of a horizon" (McClay, 2022, p. 142). We felt connected to a numinous cosmology when reading Priyadarshi and Houshmand's (2021) description of Mystery as "our human birthright", and as "what it means to be alive" (p. x). In being invited by renowned physicist Einstein to understand "the mysterious" as "the most beautiful experience we can have" (as cited in Pelzer, 2022, item #5), we experienced a sense of reverence and calm. In conversing with these descriptions and assertions, while feeling the emotion expressed or implied by the authors, our sense of interconnectedness to the Whole of life expanded. Deep listening and empathy in relation to ourselves and others regarding our relationships to Mystery were awakening a new quality of tenderness and strength within ourselves and our relations with life. This inner growth deepened our receptivity and agency to take in the challenges, limitations and vulnerabilities of our Mystery practices, as educators.

In our self-study data, we depicted some of our Mystery practices as "truncated", "surface-level", "unassuming", "not risky" and "under the radar". These limitations often reflected not knowing how to best engage Mystery. How can we best invite Mystery when students express discomfort or frustration as soon as we ask them to take time to "sit in the unknown" or "stay with their question" related to a topic discussed in class? How do we adequately respond when students feel better served by viewing curriculum and assignments as a "to-do" list to be efficiently completed? While critical thinking is essential to students' ability to "understand and challenge established perspectives" (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 175), we noted that their critical thinking is often challenged when asked to move beyond the concrete sensory world to consider larger life mysteries. For instance, Monika wrote,

> On occasions when I try to teach students to critically respond to academic articles, it seems that while students are very capable of responding to articles dealing with practical, concrete issues, they are often less capable of embracing abstract themes where the answers are not just less than straightforward but bordering on the Mystery of life. For example, students often struggle with the article that poses the question, "What Good is It To Be Enlightened?" where the article includes the allegory of Plato's cave, which asks them to appreciate the deeper Mystery of life that lies in the depth of our Being, such as Heidegger (1927/1962) and Marcel (1951) envision. Often, this article throws them off so much that they either feel so uncomfortable in dealing with the topic that they abandon the response-writing in the midst of it, or they desperately try to find concrete responses that easily fit into instrumental, technological ways. In the latter case, they fail to make sense in their responses.

In these instances, we felt a resonance with Haas' (2002) statement that, "the sad case is that education today rarely educes [Mystery] and mostly induces . . . inertia, confusion, stagnation, and futility" (Chapter 2, para. 17).

We confronted our own journey of unlearning, as well. Morgan expresses her experience of a hidden curriculum "authorizing" only sips of Mystery within educational practice. She describes her own experiences of succumbing to this pressure through a free-verse poem. This constriction is made evident in the poem's word choice, cramped format and spelling of words to emphasize sound and to conjure visceral images.

Sips of Mystery

briefly-slip-p
-ing Mystery in, being
implicit, keeping it un-
assum-ing,

almost hushhh
hhhhed.

wee openings
be-twixt, be-
tween, small

sips, infus-
ions, in-
clusions,

 too hemm-
ed in,

too re-
stricting to

genuinely gre-
et myst
-ery to-

gether. as
a cla-
ss.

How were we adopting instrumentalism (e.g., a goal-oriented, facts-based approach) more than was necessary? Are we adequately cognisant of its forms of erasure on lingering in the unknown and larger Mystery in education? Are we (re)membering instrumental reason's emphasis on the most efficient means towards the end, without contemplating the end's value, as Horkheimer

(1947/2004) warns? During our conversations, we lingered on the pain and suffering of student confessions, often shared after class, expressing their turmoil over the Planet's survival and their own potentially bleak, dystopian future with a climate emergency, economic disparity and more (Shelvock, 2023). We silently absorbed how often and significantly instrumental reason is, biologically and existentially speaking, letting students' lives down.

This betrayal made explicit another layer of instrumental reason's narrow understanding of what learning is and who students are. Extending this exploration to the literature and ourselves, we had to reckon, for instance, with the knowledge that instrumental reason does not include a universal type of rationality, whereby Mystery is understood as being imbedded in the origins of the greater existence of life, as argued by Plato in the Republic (380-360 BCE/1993). We discussed encountering this disregard for Mystery in a larger sense when contemplative/spiritual perspectives and practices are not considered "real" academic work. We shared our familiarity with mindfulness being promoted as an instrumental tool for improving student productivity and academic performance—focusing on regulating "emotional distress" and "maladaptive behaviour" (Bilgiz & Peker, 2021)—while not attending to students' existential relationship to all of life and its Mystery in this larger sense. We better realized how new insights, dialogue and illuminations are quelled when students' existential questions and transpersonal experiences are not included in how learning and well-being are understood.

Via collaborative self-study, we sat with our lamentations and followed our instincts to better understand instrumentalism's impacts on the engagement of Mystery in education. This ignited a generative space to experience a-rational ways of knowing (e.g., the affective, bodily/somatic, intuitive, creative and experiential), expanding our facility to dwell "on" and "in" Mystery, as educators. Morgan portrays her sense of expanded perspective-taking and wonder in the free-write data poem, *Mystery's Blossom*. While the poem reads in lines left to right, the layout relays the spacious circle of pedals comprising Mystery's blossom.

Mystery's Blossom

Mystery of life,
our lives,

everything that
exists,

Mystery felt,
experienced,

known and
unknown,

ALL
of life
is
Mystery's
BLOSSOM.

Diverse Dwellings "on" Mystery

Our second finding narrates diverse dwellings "on" Mystery evident in our self-study data (e.g., meeting notes, concept maps) and the literature explored during the study. By dwelling "on", we are referring to our exploration of varied understandings, experiences, orientations to and practices of Mystery. Our dwellings involved numerous self-study processes. For instance, we clustered, then mapped, different practices for inviting Mystery, practices we observed were largely embedded in a-rational ways of knowing. This mapping strengthened our ability to discern and better navigate entranceways towards Mystery with students. We juxtaposed intentional and organically unfolding Mystery practices, thickening our awareness of their complimentary contributions to student engagement. We examined Mystery practices through secular and spiritual/religious viewpoints to describe and invite different orientations to Mystery in our work with students. Further, our review of literature helped situate our dwellings "on" Mystery and invited further reflections. These explorations forwarded a dynamic tapestry of entranceways from which to invite and/or evoke Mystery. We now depict some of this tapestry.

During our self-study, we became increasingly aware of diverse conceptions, relationships and entranceways to Mystery. Morgan portrays some of this landscape. Emphasis is given to our experiences of commingling, aligning, juxtaposing and/or colliding. Key words from the data are used to assemble this poem of findings:

Mystery Multifarious

Mystery
concealed, ineffable,
mystifying,

incalculable,
closed-book,

Mystery
magnificence, wonder,
awe, over-
whelmingly
alive,

fullness, emptiness,
darkness
lighting up,

appearing, slightly
revealing,
intuitively
known,

> *Mystery*
> *fears,*
> *comforts,*
> *suspicions,*
> *worthiness of trust*
>
> *unfolding, en-*
> *foldment,*
>
> *One.*

We pondered on the ways we knowingly and unknowingly invite Mystery. Mind maps, reflection notes and conversation helped us to identify and cluster Mystery practices. A mapping of diverse entranceways to Mystery came into view. Seeking to move deeper inside the map, we explored felt-experiences of passageways through ecological imagery and metaphors. What emerged were watery exchanges, opening skies, rocky caverns, sensorial gardens and deep forests forming a biome of Mystery. This is conveyed by Morgan via creative free verse.

Biomes of Mystery

> *Watery exchanges,*
>
> *clear-water practices of*
> *mystery planned*
>
> *rippling towards*
> *burgeoning currents*
>
> *of unfettered*
> *liquid Mystery paths.*
>
> *Opening skies,*
>
> *imaginal, creative,*
> *storied*
>
> *lives. rituals, rites,*
> *symbols, metaphors,*
>
> *liturgies of opening*
> *skies*
>
> *conjuring Mystery's*
> *felt-view.*
>
> *Rocky caverns,*
>
> *confusion, tragedy, injustice,*
> *devastation, loss*

entreating relief
by Mystery's unmarked

door.

Sensorial gardens

humility, wonder, gratitude,
connection,

care, sensorial
gardens sewn

through Mystery's
pores.

Deep forest treks

presence, attuning,
quieting, pondering,

breath,

Mystery's embodiment
in the human
and Earth.

We increasingly came to view our Mystery practices as expansive, deepening engagements of a-rational ways of knowing. We offer illustration by describing three clusters of our Mystery practices relayed on our tapestry or map of practices: 1) expanding empathy, compassion and playful openness amidst uncertainty, misery and struggle; 2) engaging experiential, contemplative and ecological ways of knowing as portals towards wonder and thriving intersections with life; and 3) inviting secular and spiritual Mystery practices.

Regarding the first cluster, during self-study reflections, the significance of empathy, compassion and playful openness towards students' relations to Mystery was apparent. Consider, for example, when students' existential relations with life are tough—moody, ambivalent, confusing, without rudder or oar. Welcoming students to class "exactly as they are" conveyed one of Morgan's Mystery practices. She recounts:

> I regularly state to students that "I welcome them here today exactly as they are". At first, students look confused or dumbfounded by this statement. I continue, letting them know that whether they feel good or excited, or whether they feel cranky, miserable, confused, overwhelmed, anxious . . . tired or fed up . . . with school, work, the state of the world or life itself . . . I appreciate them being here "exactly as are". Smiling, I invite the possibility of learning as something moody, confusing or unknown. I watch students smile in recognition. I might offer a playful challenge, inquiring, "How might our cranky mood be helpful in guiding

our learning into something unexpected, surprising and valuable?" or "Shall we invite 'gut feelings' to begin our reflections on the curriculum today?"

As a Mystery practice, Morgan's welcome of students, "exactly as they are", holds an opportunity to open students towards a-rational ways of knowing—towards subconscious, emotional, gut feeling and impromptu responses—that can become engaged in ways supportive of their Being, learning and self-compassion.

As educators, we identified our invitations to students, metaphorically speaking, to sit by a fire in solitude, wearing their dressing gowns, to experience the philosopher René Descartes' "leisurely tranquility" (Descartes, 1641/1993, pp. 13-14) as another form of Mystery practice, related to the second cluster. As Descartes (1641/1993) contemplates burning questions about the uncertainty of human knowledge, he allows time for responses to come. While our Mystery practices of Descartes' "leisurely tranquility" were enacted differently, we held a shared intention to welcome that which is "burning" or "uncertain", along with the ability of inner insight to be brought forth through an "allowance of time". In particular, the tapestry of our Mystery practices emphasized synergies among a-rational ways of knowing. Given our interest in students' current existential and planetary turmoil, we attuned to Mystery practices that drew on the transforming synergies of three a-rational ways of knowing. They include the experiential (e.g., as hands-on, directly lived experience), the contemplative (e.g., as focused attention, heightened self-awareness, quieting of the mind and widening of perception) and the ecological (e.g., the interconnectedness of life—human and more-than-human, nature/Earth, Universe, Mystery—as a Whole). As an illustration of this synergetic Mystery practice, Morgan described taking pre-service teachers to a contemplative ecological center (by a lake, among trees) and a fluvarium (a window looking onto an underwater stream). Drawing on experiential learning to expand perspectives on adolescent development and youth engagement being studied in class, she hoped students would attune to the a-rational synergies of these spaces. Would the "voices" of nature, their inner existential worlds and hands-on sensory experience converse? Would they experience connection and shared unfolding between themselves and non-human life forms (of water, trees, fish, Earth, Universe and Mystery)? Would such synergy further attune them to their connectedness to the larger grandeur and sacred interconnectedness of life? Students freely explored these spaces while allowing contemplative dialogue to naturally arise. Their shared experiences of felt connection led to their articulation of the collective question, "How can we invite our future students into these kinds of experiences, as teachers?". This experience of shared energy or "burning" led to their subsequent existential reflections on experiences of "human-ecological connection", "stillness", "wonder" and "ah-hah" insights on life. Here we have seen the potential for students to experience wonder, Mystery and their connectedness to life in relation to course curriculum via the synergies of their ecological, contemplative and experiential forms of knowing, as beings.

During our self-study, we explored our secular (i.e., physical and human) and spiritual (i.e., metaphysical, spiritual, beyond human) Mystery practices, related to the third cluster. We shared having experienced the depth of Mystery in both. For example, supporting student critical thinking

beyond the human and physical realms, Monika shared a spiritual Mystery practice via an "alleged ghost sighting" exercise:

> I showed a picture of an alleged ghost sighting to the class, and I asked the students to debate, based on the picture, whether ghosts exist. I asked them to come up with at least five well-articulated reasons for their positions. The debate spilt over to break time. After the break, most students were willing to discuss the struggle with Mystery in relation to life and death within their experiences and the challenge of critical thinking with regard to their own powerful experiences. The class was a huge success.

Recounting a secular Mystery practice, Morgan asked students to use academic texts to create found poems (i.e., to cull words, phrases and lines from a text to create a poem). This secular orientation opened students to poetic forms of Being as understood by Heidegger (1946/1971, p. 24). Students were invited to read the text by underlining words or phrases on each page that felt visceral for them: that moved, stirred or opened them. Reading their found poems aloud led to subsequent reflections: "something shifted"; "felt more meaningful"; felt "good"; felt "alive"; "deepened" inside and/or in relation to life.

Conceptualizing Mystery practices as a-rational clusters of knowing, igniting in tandem to give passage to Mystery was a transforming self-study finding. Here, Mystery practices are understood as Mystery being expressed through life and all that exists, including students' own lives. This conceptualization emphasizes how a-rational ways of knowing draw us towards dwelling within this expansiveness of our Being. As Mystery practices open students into meaningful connections with themselves and life, the possibilities of individual and collective thriving exponentially expand.

We extended our dwellings "on" Mystery by exploring literature descriptions inviting Mystery, in order to further orient and ground our self-study explorations. We were taken by the different descriptions and emphases used for entrance to and relationship with Mystery. Kidd (2012) discusses our receptivity to Mystery, its importance, cultivation and loss of engagement in our lives. Wein (2022) argues that Mystery helps us make sense of the "absurdity" of our world. Palmer (1990) calls Mystery "a primal and powerful human experience that can neither be ignored nor reduced to formula"; an engagement of living with questions and a readiness to use all our "faculties", including humour and motivation, to grow (p. 11). Osho (in Haas, 2002), states, "that by knowing it [i.e., truth], the mystery does not disappear; in fact it becomes very, very deep. . . . By knowing the truth, nothing is solved" (Chapter 1, para. 14). Schinkel (2018) views "deep" or "contemplative" wonder as a reply to Mystery. Cooper (2012) argues that "a sense of mystery . . . *finds* room . . . by *making* room" for humility and compassion (p. 10). As shown in the literature above, Mystery is an invitation to metaphysical understandings, imagination and a-rational ways of knowing.

We decided to formulate our literature reflections into a "Mystery question" practice to both compliment and expand our tapestry of Mystery practices. We imagine engaging some of following questions with students: What occurs when it sinks in that the Mystery may "not be solved" or "ignored"? What happens when we view ourselves in genuine relationship to Mystery as "receptors", as "participants", as "a part of" it and as involving "all our facilities"? How often do we attribute our

"humility", "compassion" and "wonder" to the Mystery of existence within our existential reality? How often do we nod in agreement rather than openly discuss the deep Mystery of truth, as Osho (in Haas, 2002) invites, when our students realize how much they still don't know? How consistently do we talk with our students about the humility cultivated from not knowing, as Cooper (2012) invites for consideration? Do we discuss our receptivity, cultivation and participation in Mystery with students, as Kidd (2012) discusses? And, more specifically, as this connects to our course context and pedagogy?

Edmund Brundis, a character in the film *The Bookshop*, states that the *inability* to understand a book is a good thing because "understanding makes the mind lazy" (Coixet, 2017, 55:41). Rather than seeking to rationally understand Mystery, our data expressed our attempts to engage a-rational pathways to Mystery to become in fuller relationship with it. Mystery became a Subject to be in active relationship with, not an object for study. We saw Mystery as living, ever emergent and able to be humanly experienced via the diverse capacities, identities and contexts by which we participate in the world. We understood that our educational practices are *always* in relationship to Mystery whether we are aware of this or not. We realized that students are better served when inviting them to engage their own unique relationships to Mystery. As educators, our role is to offer multiple openings from which students can listen, receive and intercede with Mystery and to honour complex living relationships to Mystery—elusive, decipherable, secular, spiritual, full, empty, trusting, untrusting, and so on.

Diverse Dwellings "in" Mystery

Our third theme explores dwellings "in" Mystery, which refers to experiences of Being, as human beings, within the ultimate Mystery, including feeling an intrinsic part of this Mystery. Through this exploration, we share our awakening to the value of an "ontological-existential meaning structure" (Magrini, 2015) of Mystery in education to ground and ignite experiences of dwellings "in" Mystery. For us, Being refers to what makes our existence intelligible for us within the Whole of life. We define Mystery as the philosophical, spiritual and poetic version of mystery-as-such, which can never be fully experienced or understood. (A more expansive definition is found in the glossary.) Here, Mystery is understood as inviting us deeper into our Being. In her self-study reflections, Monika described this Mystery using a simile:

> Mystery is like a pitch-dark warehouse where we walk around with flashlights, always illuminating small parts of the warehouse while walking around. We can never see Mystery in its Whole—for that an infinite mind would be required who can turn on the main switch illuminating the entire warehouse—but each person carrying a flashlight illuminates the person's own part of the Whole. Nobody is ever wrong about any part captured, but nobody can ever capture, hence, know the Whole.

Building on the scenario described by Monika, we begin posing (as two beings, each, with her own flashlight), the original Heideggerian question (1927/1962, I.2, p. 21): What does it mean to be? What is the meaning of our Being? Or, simply, what does it mean to exist (i.e., Being within the "warehouse" of Mystery)? During our self-study inquiries of dwellings in Mystery through our Being,

we became aware that we had not explicitly connected our exploration of a-rational epistemologies (in Theme 1 and Theme 2) within the larger context of an ontology (i.e., an understanding of the nature of existence) in our educational practices. We began asking the following questions: How might an ontology support and/or extend our epistemological engagements with Mystery? What might an ontology of Mystery contribute to students' present-day social-ecological turmoil and existential angst? How might an ontology ground and ignite our experiences of dwellings "in" Mystery, as educators?

Our questions guided us to literature that directly articulated or indirectly implied an ontology of Mystery. Within these accounts, we further attended to descriptions that articulate Being and Mystery as existing in relationship to one another, whether residing in, alongside or being of the same nature. Rahner (1976/1978), for instance, describes the human being as "that existence to whom the silent and uncontrollable infinity of reality is always present as . . . mystery" regardless of how a person might comprehend this relation (in Nuttall & McEvoy, 2019, p. 727). Lefler and Wiethaus (2009) speak of the cosmology story of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, which describes humans entering the world they live in through a sky vault from the upper world and asserts that the harmony and balance of their Being and of the relationship between worlds can be restored by their annual ceremonies. Wood **(**2009**),** drawing from Plato and Aristotle, views Mystery as "Being", that which is Whole, "outside of which there is nothing" else (p. 204). For some mystics, Being is understood as something numinous (McClay, 2022)—as the "ultimate nonsensuous unity", the Mystery of "the Oneness of All" residing beyond human senses and reason (Stace, 1960, p. 14). Heidegger (1927/1962) describes Being as immersed in Mystery, although a particular being (a human being), entering at a particular time in history, he refers to as *Dasein*. He references *Dasein*'s presence as Being-in-the-world-with-one-another in our everyday, concrete situations, where we care about our Being (i.e., existing here and now in the world in all our specificities of subjectivities, experience and context). Marcel (1951), similarly, views Being as Mystery, articulated via the self's experience of its Being through its presence in the world. These descriptions brought to our attention the notion that an ontological perspective offers a grounding in Being that draws Mystery in. This was central to our self-study findings. It was an affirmation that we could further strengthen our Mystery practices by being more creative and attentive to how students' Being naturally draws Mystery in. From this realization, further possibilities and questions began to unfold. For instance, we needed to return to the educational literature to better ground this sense of ontology within educational curriculum, itself. In effect, we turned to Magrini's (2015) analysis of Aoki's educational philosophy to better consider an ontological perspective of education within our practices.

According to Magrini (2015), Aoki theorizes two modes of world-disclosure in education: 1) the "ontological-existential meaning structures"; and 2) the "constructed epistemological, psychological and social categories" (p. 275). Aoki argues that the second mode is derived from the first, while highlighting that the current educational focus is on the second, to the neglect of the first. Aoki states that this neglect is problematic because "within the authentic space of the curriculum, students and teachers dwell and transform their reality guided by their unique potential-for-Being" (as cited in Magrini, 2015, p. 275). Aoki's statement became another an "ah-hah" moment. As shown

in this paper, inviting students' unique (potential for) Being was a foundational commitment we shared. This was something we sought to emphasize via our a-rational epistemological practices. However, these practices had not been consciously or actively situated by us within an ontological perspective on Mystery. This awareness led us to revisit our self-study data for potential examples of an ontological perspective underlying our Mystery practices. Here we share two examples that were identified. Drawing from a spiritual ontological orientation to Mystery through Being, Monika discussed a proposed course design, stating,

> My proposal to design a course on Psychology of Death was approved. Talking about death on an ontological-existential level invites the a-rational into student learning. Visiting gravesites and funeral homes, or interviewing people who have had near-death experiences or felt the presence of a loved one after they died allows students to reflect on the Mystery in relation to death, the end of their lives, and the possibility of an afterlife, including their own. They will be encouraged to contemplate or create artworks, such as drawings, short-stories, poems or sculptures to give voice to the normally inexpressible and indescribable within the depth of their Being in relation to death. These assignments encourage students to get in touch with Mystery in relation to death as opposed to memorizing theory and regurgitating information via instrumental rationality.

Earlier, Morgan had shared reflections on Mystery becoming a passageway for students to enter into the depths of their beings, recognizing this example now as an unfolding of Being illustrative of an ontological orientation to Mystery (viz., Being-in-the-world-with-one-another in our everyday, concrete situations, as per Heidegger, 1927/1962), and she describes the following event:

> Students were asked to write and present a biographical educational narrative. During a student's presentation, there was a visceral stillness and silence in class. Moving with the Mystery of this unfolding non-verbal presence, I invited students to stand in a circle to offer non-verbal feedback. While voluntary, I recommended students take a few deep breaths, and if, and when, they were ready, one at a time, to offer a few silent, physical movements or gestures to communicate their feedback. I watched in amazement as students intuitively offered feedback from a depth of Mystery in their being. I witnessed movements familiar, surprising and foreign. I felt a knowing through Mystery, being stirred, woken, in the class. The presenter became emotional and began to tear up, sharing that she felt "so seen", "honoured", "touched" and "inspired" by their feedback.

Aoki's ontological-existential meaning structures naturally lead to big questions on Mystery and Being. We posed the questions: Is elucidating an ontology of Mystery potentially a life-sustaining and life-enhancing response to being a part of something *SO* much larger than ourselves? Might an ontology of Mystery ignite us (as educators and students), to better care for, and stand by, the sacredness and grace of these irrevocable human and more-than-human interconnections? Could collaborative exploration of these questions be life-restorative for current human-ecological turmoil? Via these questions, we realized that our a-rational epistemologies, reflective of our Mystery practices, could be expanded and deepened. For example, we discussed exploring the climate crisis with students by posing fundamental questions about our existence in the world. This meant not

solely discussing the physical condition of our Being in the world from a rational, biological standpoint of, for example, how many trees we should plant to survive, but also as an opportunity to go beyond survival to take in and engage with the Mystery in everyday life in this physical world that makes life worthwhile, even sacred, in our interconnected world. Beyond survival discourses based solely on the Anthropocene, can we step into the Mystery through our Being in the world, as individual beings, together, to contemplatively explore and co-create a better world from openings of deep interconnectedness and genuine agency with life?

Through an ontology of Mystery, our understanding of possibilities to better ground and ignite our Mystery practices has grown. First, we are more attentive to how Being draws Mystery in. For example, during visits to cemeteries, while contemplating the limitedness of our Being in this world, we often inquire about the meaning of life that is shrouded in Mystery: What is this life all about anyway? Second, we have become actively engaged in the ways an ontology of Mystery can strengthen our a-rational epistemological practices of Mystery. For example, students often examine the possibility or reality of Being in the world that is dying due to human abuse of the environment, which leads students to believe that our a-rational intuition to learn to love Mother Earth may be the answer for a better world. Third, we realized that we feel better inoculated from the pressures of neoliberalism because an ontology of Mystery further de-centres its precepts and practices. Fourth, we have come to imagine dwellings "in" Mystery through Being as rhizomatic in expression—de-centered, multifaceted, differentiated, multi-directional (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2013)—thus recognizing how Mystery and Being encroach on each other, both intruding on and advancing beyond their limits (Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Mystery in terms of Being has varied appearances which invite different experiences, conversations and meanings. From these dynamic spaces, we believe that students and educators become more alive in and through Mystery and their Being as opposed to settling into just being afraid, feeling overwhelmed or waiting to be told what they need to know, do or tell. Through such processes, we find greater possibilities in our Being—as Daly (1998) invites us—to be able to throw "one's life as far as it will go" (p. 4).

From Known to Unknown to Unknown

As educators, collaborative self-study ignited our Mystery understandings and practices in life-giving ways. We learned that being in active relationship to Mystery, as a Subject, not as an object of study, was primary to educational practice. Through inquiry processes of dwellings "on" and "in" Mystery, we came to better understand, articulate and engage Mystery practices in ways that moved students and ourselves more fully towards the Whole of our Being and its interconnectedness to all of life. Our felt-experiences and understandings of neoliberal education's negative impacts on Mystery deepened. Through our lamentation (Theme 1) of narrow models of rationality and learning, we explored the ways in which these contexts often push Mystery to the periphery of education, capturing little attention or regard. We came to better understand the consequences of excluding or shying away from Mystery, as educators. In dwellings "on" Mystery (Theme 2), we explored our tapestry of a-rational curricular and pedagogical understandings and practices of Mystery. In doing so, we deepened our turn towards a-rational ways of knowing and a universal (i.e., expanded) type of

rationality whereby Mystery is understood as being expressed through everything that exists, including our Being as students and educators. This deepened our realization of the importance of inviting diverse entranceways from which students can meaningfully engage Mystery in their schooling and lives. We further grounded and empowered these commitments via our dwellings "in" Mystery, which led to an articulation of an ontology of Mystery in relation to Being in education (Theme 3). Here we became mindful to the ways our Being naturally draws Mystery in, which in turn served to expand and deepen the potential of our a-rational epistemological practices. Our ontological explorations further opened us to the creative rhizomatic expressions between Being and Mystery, as they reside in dynamic relationship, whether residing in, alongside or being of the same nature.

A neoliberal education system that is narrowly focused on the use of instrumental reason fails to adequately and/or meaningfully engage students' experiences of Mystery, existential turmoil, survival precarity and hope for a restorative planetary-human context. In contrast, Mystery's entranceways invite expanded perspectives for life-supporting connections, possibilities and humility in relation to our educational practices, and life itself.

In the spirit of collegial dialogue, we close with the following questions for reflection: Is an ontological perspective of Mystery and Being in education needed within our current planetary context? Might it foster further expressions of humility, along with acceptance that, as educators, we are neither "experts" on education nor on the state of our world, within the context of our education-making and interactions with students? Could emphasis on Being in education rudder the learning process further towards wonder, curiosity and the fragile, sacred interconnectedness of all of life, including ourselves in the classroom? How might our experiences, conceptions and relationships to and with Mystery shift?

Through collaborative self-study, we deepened our turn towards Mystery as a regenerative educational response for planetary and human survival and thriving. In the following poem, Morgan strives to portray a glimpse of this hope and potentiality embedded in our relationship with Mystery and its embrace:

Primordial Unfurling

speechless beauty
of Being

ceaselessly
unfurling through

primordial
Mystery.

Glossary

A-rational: This term refers to that which lies beyond the reach of reason (Brakel, 2023). A-rational is different from irrational, which is used to denote the opposite of reason. That which is a-rational does not oppose reason but surpasses the limits of reason. Simply, it is more than rational. The a-rational may include the following expressions amongst others: contemplative, meditative, creative, ecological, holistic, poetic, somatic, affective and experiential.

Being: There is a distinction between *Being* and *being,* which is originally inspired by Martin Heidegger's work (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For Heidegger, Being (capitalized) is that which makes beings intelligible for individual beings (spelt in lower case). Heidegger calls this being, *Dasein*. *Dasein* finds itself at a particular time in history in a world which is already undergoing. *Being* is capitalized as the derivative (gerund) of the intransitive verb *to be*, as opposed to *being,* which is used as a noun. In this paper, Being and being also include the more spiritual understanding of the terms. In this case, these meanings stand closer to the Atman-Brahman principle of Hinduism: When reality is focused through the individual, it is called Atman (being); but, when reality is focused through the ultimate source, it is called Brahman (Being); (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1989).

Dwelling: The word may have been inspired by Heidegger's understanding, but the use of it in this paper goes deeper than his work would allow for it. Heidegger argues that one exists or "dwells" where one feels at home, within a familiar structure and familiar sense-making practice (Heidegger, 1954/1971). We use this inspiration to think about dwellings "on" as exploration of different understandings, experiences, orientations and/or practices of Mystery, and dwellings "in" as experiences of Being, as beings, residing in and with mystery, and also feeling as an intrinsic part of Mystery itself.

Existential Subjectivity: This term has two components: existential and subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to the state of being a subject, as opposed to an object, with a first-person, internal view. Existential refers to our state of existence. Hence, existential subjectivity refers to our state of existing as subjects.

Instrumental Reason: Instrumental reasoning prioritizes a person's use of suitable means to achieve an end. The emphasis is on the efficiency with which a goal can be most effectively achieved. Horkheimer warns that human beings have shifted away from objective reason that expresses universal truths and guides the rightness and wrongness of human actions through proper means and, instead, they have shifted toward this goal-oriented attitude (Horkheimer, 1947/2004). This shift can be explicitly detected in neoliberalism in which not just the economy and politics, but the education system as well, are serving the end goal of the neoliberal interest of the free market. Students are treated as customers served by their educators with the end goal of gaining a good financial return upon the completion of their diplomas and certificates, which allows them to acquire higher-paying jobs.

Mystery: It is possible to talk about mystery (spelt in lower case), which indicates individual mysteries present in everyday life, such as, for example, the mystery of a missing key or the mystery of a murder suspect in a who-done-it television show. As opposed to the common usage of this type of individualized mystery, Mystery (capitalized) portrays the deeper philosophical, spiritual and poetic version of mystery-as-such, *sui generis*. Mystery (capitalized) cannot be reduced to lower concepts, and it surpasses all conventional boundaries. Certain other words, such as Oneness, Whole, Subject and Otherness, intrinsically connected to Mystery, are capitalized for similar reasons.

Neoliberalism: Neoliberalism is used in this paper as a political and economic policy model that endorses free-market capitalism and aims to transfer ownership, property and business from the government to the private sector (Vallier, 2022). It tends to transfer the power over educational institutions from a democratically run government to the market-driven private sector where it increasingly serves the interest of the free market (Melanson, 2023). This often leads to the prioritizing of skills-based knowledge and training that strictly serves the interest of free-market capitalism, at the exclusion of any other knowledge or approach. For example, it has no interest in human existential concerns that would improve the human condition, increase critical thinking or deliver social justice, abandoning concerns that lie outside of its free-market interest. Neoliberal education understood this way leads to a domination of instrumental reasoning.

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