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# Interdisciplinarity, neoliberalism and academic identities: Reflections on recent developments at the University of Botswana

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## Abstract

This paper explicates the growing interest in interdisciplinarity as a form of knowledge organisation at the University of Botswana (UB). It accomplishes this by locating this development in a global context of a growing instrumentalisation of knowledge, partially occasioned by the advent of the knowledge society. Generally, the paper argues that interdisciplinarity is not some neutral, apolitical technical re-arrangement of knowledge, as often presented. Rather, it is a political technology implicated in attempts to break academics' monopoly on the processes and products of higher education (HE). It attributes interdisciplinarity's rise to the emergence in the 1970s of neoliberalism as a social settlement that privileges market rationality. There is, therefore, affinity between interdisciplinarity and neoliberalism, and it is a relationship in which the former is being deployed by the latter in HE to produce 'neoliberal academic subjects'. The case of UB is presented as a specific case of the general argument that interdisciplinarity is designed to effect new forms of academic subjectivities attuned to market rationality.

## Introduction

Interdisciplinarity has assumed centre stage in calls for reimagining higher education. The relevance of disciplines as *the* structures around which the university's core activities of research, teaching and outreach revolve has been called into question (Forman, 2012; Fairbairn & Fulton, 2000). Interdisciplinary research and teaching are on the surge in Canada (Shailer, 2005), Germany (Weingart & Padberg, 2014), USA (Sa, 2008), UK (Holmwood, 2010), South Africa (Moore, 2003; Ensor, 2004) and Australia (Millar, 2016). Research grants and quality assurance agencies insist on it

being self-evident in both research proposals and university teaching programs (Tress, Tress & Fry, 2004). Interdisciplinarity has assumed the status of a 'travelling policy' and is a measure of a university's 'responsiveness' to the demands of its clients. In South Africa it is in vogue through the concept of 'programmatisation' (Moore, 2003; Ensor, 2004). The University of Botswana (UB), on its part, plans to increase interdisciplinarity and decrease departmental compartmentalisation (University of Botswana, 2009). Originating from the metropolis, the debate on interdisciplinarity has reached the shores of the Global South, the periphery of the global geo-political system, courtesy of agents of globalisation, such as the World Bank (WB) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), among many others.

Interdisciplinarity as a reform initiative is rationalised in terms of attuning higher education to the demands of 'consumers' (e.g. students, parents and the labour market) of higher education goods and services. Quite a good deal has been written on it, even though it still remains a fuzzy concept (Newell & Green, 1982; Klein & Newell, 1998; Welch, 2009; Weingart & Stehr, 2000; Frodeman, 2011; Forman, 2012). While it is the case that this literature has impressively mapped the conceptual contours of the phenomenon, at the level of practice however, inter-disciplinarity often is presented as a technocratic exercise that involves simply repackaging existing knowledge to achieve the twin ends of relevance and responsiveness. This 'technicist' view of interdisciplinarity abounds in policy documents on higher education (Millar, 2016; Tabulawa, Polelo & Silas, 2013). Less emphasised is interdisciplinarity's *ideological dimension* i.e. how it impacts university culture and reshapes academics' professional identities. Viewed as ideological, interdisciplinarity becomes a *political technology*, which advances by "taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 196). Stripped of its political character, interdisciplinarity is little more than a technical reorientation of knowledge. This technicist orientation is more striking in a particular strand of interdisciplinarity, *instrumental interdisciplinarity*, which has proved quite seductive in the re-imagining of the contemporary university (Salter & Hearn, 1996), and has impacted all domains of knowledge, the Humanities included (Martin, 2012; Donoghue, 2008).

In this paper I adopt a political economy approach to explicate the growing interest in and influence of interdisciplinarity as a form of knowledge organisation. I locate this development in a global context of a growing instrumentalisation of knowledge, partially occasioned by the advent of the knowledge society. Generally, I argue that interdisciplinarity is not some neutral, apolitical technical re-arrangement of knowledge, as often presented. Rather, it is a political technology implicated in attempts to break academics' monopoly on the processes and products of higher education (HE) to form new academic identities and subjectivities that reflect a corporatist ethos. I attribute interdisciplinarity's rise to the emergence in the 1970s of neoliberalism as a regime of accumulation that privileges market rationality. There is, therefore, affinity between interdisciplinarity and neoliberalism. However, and as I shall argue in the paper, this affinity does not suggest an ideological similarity. Introduced in HE as part of a gamut of neoliberal nostrums, interdisciplinarity is concerned to produce what Ball (2012, p. 29) calls a 'neoliberal academic subject'. It seeks to achieve this by (a) wresting the power to control the processes and products of the university away from academics and, following that, (b) forming new academic identities and subjectivities that support the needs of the market-based economy. This imbrication of interdisciplinarity with the neoliberal project is clearly manifest at the University of Botswana (UB), where recent reforms, which include both interdisciplinary research and interdisciplinary teaching programmes, have sought to loosen academics' grip on higher education with a view to make them more amenable to market rationality. Interdisciplinarity, the paper argues, is predominantly about refashioning new academic identities. It urges a re-politicisation of the interdisciplinarity dabate, for it is only by re-inserting politics into the debate that we may demonstrate its profound effects on academics and the university as we have always known them.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The section that follows defines both interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity with the aim to expose the political nature of the former as well as the fact that while interdisciplinarity is an antidote to disciplinarity, it is not explicable without reference to the latter. The section is followed by a brief historical context of the rise of interdisciplinarity, from a political economy perspective. I emphasise here the dynamic relationships between the state, market and society in interdisciplinarity's surge. This is followed by a section on the relationship between neoliberalism and interdisciplinarity. The rise of market governance

in the 1970s provided a platform for the ascendancy of interdisciplinarity. The latter's mission, I argue, is to prise open disciplinarity so as to expose those inside – the academics – who are accused of 'capturing' disciplines for their own selfish interests. Using the neo-liberal concepts of 'provider-capture' and 'knowledge re-purposing', I show how finally the assault on disciplines was launched and with what effects. In the penultimate section I consider initiatives at the University of Botswana, especially their foregrounding of interdisciplinarity, and the neoliberal national context in which they emerged. I argue that the initiatives, while portrayed as apolitical, have immense potential to mobilise the identity of the consumer among students and of the entrepreneur among academics. I conclude the paper by reflecting on the difficult position the spectre of interdisciplinarity puts academics in.

## Definitional issues

### Interdisciplinarity

Notwithstanding the diverse definitions of interdisciplinarity in the literature, a consensus on some of its major features is decipherable from some of the representative definitions. Two prominent scholars of interdisciplinarity define it as:

> A process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession… [It] draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective (Klein and Newell, 1998, p. 393–394).

The National Academy of Sciences (2005, p.188), on its part, defines interdisciplinary research as:

> a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice.

Three main features are clear in the two definitions. First, both definitions *emphasise problem-solving*. In other words, interdisciplinary knowledge has instrumental value. Second, interdisciplinarity *integrates* approaches or methodologies from different disciplines. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that contemporary problems are too complex to be satisfactorily

addressed by appeal to the canons of a single discipline. *Integration* is what distinguishes interdisciplinarity from the related concepts of 'multi-disciplinarity' and 'transdisciplinarity'. The former is best defined as a juxtaposition of disciplines (Shailer, 2005), with 'little or no effort to integrate different data sets, approaches or fields' (Frodeman, 2011, p. 106). Transdisciplinarity, on the other hand, involves knowledge production in collaboration with non-university entities (e.g. industry) i.e. it takes knowledge production beyond the university borders. Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow's (1994) 'Mode 2', where knowledge is produced in the context of application, exemplifies transdisciplinarity. Often, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are used interchangeably. Third, both definitions present interdisciplinarity as some neutral, technical and apolitical concept, thereby concealing its political nature. This is the sense in which interdsciplinarity is a political technology. Wrapped up in neutral language, interdisciplinarity is not easy to appreciate as a micro-technology of change. De-neutralising it is the first step towards understanding it as a technology of change. Paradoxically, this 'de-neutralisation' process has as a pre-requisite an understanding of disciplinarity (Nowacek, 2009). But before I can look into disciplinarity in any detail, let me first delineate the strands of interdisciplinarity, for it is not a homogenous or unitary concept.

Klein's (1986) and Salter and Hearn's (1996) delineations of inter-disciplinarity, which overlap, are instructive here. The former distinguishes between *endogenous interdisciplinarity*, which is "concerned with the production of new knowledge" with the aim of achieving the unity of science and *exogenous interdisciplinarity*, which "interrogates the disciplines on the demarcations they apply to 'real life' and demands that the University fulfil its social mandate" (Klein, 1986, as cited in Shailer, 2005, p. 2). Salter and Hearn (1996, p. 29) on the other hand (but working on the basis of Klein's distinction) distinguishes between *instrumental interdisciplinarity* (IID), which is a "a problem-solving activity that may be designed to cater to the demands of industry and government" and *conceptual interdisciplinarity* (CID), which is "concerned specifically with theoretical issues, epistemology, pedagogy, and the disciplining of knowledge". Endogenous/conceptual interdisciplinarity challenged disciplinarity in that it endeavoured to produce knowledge in context and the sort of knowledge that was responsive to context, but it shared with disciplinarity a commitment to 'for-its-own-sake' knowledge (Forman, 2012). The result of this challenge was the emergence of

'interdisciplines' such as Women Studies, Cultural Studies and Gender Studies. However, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s as a political-cultural project appropriated CID to promote its (neoliberalism's) pro-market policies in higher education. This appropriation represented a shift to IID, with its focus on instrumental knowledge. The economic realities of the 1980s and 1990s could only serve to promote IID in academic institutions and funding agencies. Therefore, the term interdisciplinarity as used in this paper refers to 'problem-based, instrumental interdisciplinarity' since it is the one that has assumed an almost hegemonic status in knowledge production and curation (Forman, 2012).

## Disciplinarity

Definitions of disciplinarity abound. Weingart and Stehr's (1996, p. xi) is quite comprehensive and I cite it at length here. Disciplines are:

> . . . intellectual but also social structures, organizations made up of human beings with vested interests based on time investments, acquired reputations, and established social networks that shape and bias their views on the relative importance of their knowledge. As social organizations, disciplines participate in and contribute to conflicts over political, economic, legal, and ethical decisions. . . In all these functions, scientific disciplines constitute the modern social order of knowledge, and the order of knowledge is in this sense a political order as well.

Two observations; first, as *social structures*, disciplines suffuse with power relations. They condition the behaviours, practices, values and attitudes of academics (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Reputation and status accrue to academics as a result of their membership of disciplinary fields: the "status of academics rests on their ability to enforce claims to a monopoly of expertise within a disciplinary field" (Middleton, 2000, p. 546). In terms of Gidden's (1984) 'structuration postulate', disciplines, as social structures, simultaneously enable and constrain academics' actions. This is a dialectical dynamic – disciplines are created by, and in turn create academics. In short, disciplines are political entities; second, is the question 'whose interests are served by disciplinarity?' Disciplines "believe in the priority of their own concerns and turn from their larger mission to the training of professionals for whom those concerns are not only prior but exclusive" (Fish, 1989, p. 16). They are inward-looking and self-serving. In short, disciplines are self-referential, a necessary condition for production of 'for-its-own-sake' or esoteric knowledge. This effectively insulates academics from the interests of

consumers such as industry, parents and students, what Fish (1989) above refers to as the 'larger mission' of disciplines. Consequently, where instrumental knowledge and student employability are at a premium (as is the case today), disciplinarity, as a form of knowledge organisation, is considered dysfunctional. Disciplines connote "being static, rigid, conservative, and adverse to innovation" (Weingart, 2000, p. 29). Conversely, interdisciplinarity is a discourse of innovation (Klein, 2000). It is this perceived anti-innovation quality of disciplinarity that is the target of interdisciplinarity. To make the university relevant and responsive to the demands of those outside the "constricting circles of expertise" (Frodeman, 2011, p. 108), it is essential to dismantle its building blocks (i.e. disciplines) as a way of rescuing knowledge from capture by academics. Klein (1996, p. 36), on her part, is not as radical; rather than dismantling, she sees interdisciplinarity as calling for a "lowering of disciplinary walls, opening gates between fiefdoms, and lessening tariff mentality". Thus, while definitions of interdisciplinarity appear technocratic, when juxtaposed with those of disciplinarity their political character is unambiguous.

To summarise, interdisciplinarity is a "critique of the current authority and autonomy of disciplines to govern academic knowledge production" (Huutoniemi, 2015, p.16). It is a *political technology* (Shore and Wright, 1999; Krejsler and Carney, 2009) meant to profoundly change not only the work of academics but also their self-understanding and identities.

## A brief historical context

Interdisciplinarity's political nature lies in the fact that it has the potential to change the:

> discourses through which the university is spoken of, and the cultures within which it is lodged [as well as] (re)shape [academics'] professional identities and subjectivities in ways that support the new dominant discourses, especially in order to make university practices more accountable to the citizen and employer as client (Krejsler & Carney, 2009, p. 89).

The dominant discourses today are those associated with neoliberalism as a regime of accumulation, a regime that, as noted above, has appropriated interdisciplinarity for the purpose of reconstituting the university through mentalities of the market (Davies & Bansel, 2010). Martimianakis and Muzzin (2015, pp. 1466–1467) capture nicely the relationship between neoliberalism and interdisciplinarity:

> The discourse of instrumental interdisciplinarity manifests as a particular technology of neoliberalism that supports a mechanism of exploitation by dismantling structures that interfere with a mutable and interchangeable workforce aligned to economic imperatives, while those caught up in the discursive relations of interdisciplinarity maintain a sense of freedom and possibility.

The remaining sections of the paper demonstrate how interdisciplinarity as adopted at the University of Botswana, as well as elsewhere for that matter, seeks to dismantle disciplinarity as a structure that is seen as interfering with the production of a flexible workforce aligned with the country's economic imperatives. I posit that interdisciplinarity seeks to accomplish this by (a) wresting the power to control the processes and products of the university away from academics and (b) forming new academic identities and subjectivities that support the needs of the market-based economy. But first, a brief note on the historical context of the decline of disciplinarity and the subsequent rise of interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity emerged as a serious challenge to disciplinarity in the 1980s. Otherwise between the 1920s and the 1970s disciplinarity reigned supreme. How are we to understand disciplinarity's decline relative to the rise of interdisciplinarity in the dying decades of the 20th century? Answering this question requires a political economy approach in which special attention is paid to the historic shifts between the state, market and society that have characterised Western societies since the late nineteenth century.

Historically, state-market-society relations are dynamic and unstable. From time to time the relations get strained, but ultimately they must stabilise somehow. The stabilised relations yield a 'social settlement', defined by Robertson (2000, p. 8) as:

> a particular combination of thought patterns, material conditions and human institutions which have a certain coherence among its elements. These structures do not predetermine actions; rather, they constitute the framework within which actions are shaped and take place.

Robertson (2000) identifies three settlements in modern history, namely, laissez-faire liberalism (1850–1900), Keynesian welfarism (1945–1970) and neoliberalism (1970 to present). Briefly, laissez-faire liberalism had the self-regulating market and the state as separate domains of society. By the turn of the 20th century, however, liberalism was imploding since it "carried within it the seeds of its own destruction" (Robertson, 2000, p. 67). The implosion led to the institution in the post-World War II era of a social settlement which "involved active state control of the economy and extensive interference with

the self-regulating mechanism of the market…" (Fotopoulos, 2005, p. 6). Within this social settlement emerged a new *social contract* between the state and the citizen/society, in which the state had an obligation to protect the citizen/society from the vagaries of the market by managing the latter. Similarly, a social compact was drawn between the university on one hand and society and the state on the other: universities enjoyed high levels of trust from both the state and society, resulting not only in generous funding but also in academics being recognised as professionals protected from state interference when discharging their social mandate:

> By and large, the respect which universities received was accorded on the grounds of their dispassionate concern for truth, and of the contribution which they made to national well-being. . . it was generally thought that the high status of the members of universities entitled them to freedom to pursue the truth in accordance with the rules and traditions of their various disciplines and institutions (Shils, 1975, as cited in Du Toit, 2007, p. 48).

With the academics now in charge of their own labour, disciplines entrenched themselves, not least because of their (disciplines) promise to produce the knowledge required for social engineering purposes (Mishra, 1984). This interface of the state and expertise is succinctly summarised by Bottery and Wright (2000, p. 12):

> Governments, the general public, public service managers, and the professionals themselves saw their welfare state systems as ones that were underpinned by *professions* who through their *expertise* had the ability to know what needed to be done; and who through their codes of ethics and *altruism* could be trusted not only to know what was best, but also would do this as well. They could and should be *trusted* to perform their crucial social functions in an *independent* and *autonomous* manner (emphasis added).

The autonomy allowed academics to determine the outputs of higher education insulated from the users of those outputs, with the result that:

> The modern university became a closed epistemological circle: knowledge production circulated between researchers, and between researchers and students, reaching the larger world through indirect means. The transmission of knowledge to society was understood as largely automatic in nature, and commonly devalued as 'dissemination', 'outreach' and 'dumbing down' (Frodeman, 2011, p. 107).

In neoliberal parlance, academics had 'captured' knowledge production and curation, thus turning the university into an insular institution. But this was not an isolated development. Rather, it was part and parcel of a general loss of faith in professional expertise that emerged in the late 1960s in the form of the 'revolt of the client' (Haug and Sussman, 1969), partially occasioned by the 'postmodern turn'. Taking place almost simultaneously was the rise of neoliberalism as a challenge to the Keynesian welfare state settlement. This

challenge entailed a realignment of the state-market-society relationship, in which the market threatened to dominate the other two sites. The advent of neoliberalism meant a break down in the high levels of trust the university had enjoyed since the inter-war period. What we are witnessing today is an attempt to invert almost everything that the university stood for under the Keynesian welfare state settlement, including the view that the university exists f*or its own sake* and is an *end in itself*. Calls for universities and academics to account for their activities indicate that they can "no longer trusted to benefit state and society if simply left to their own devices (sic)" (Du Toit, 2007, p. 7). This leaves disciplinarity, that unquestioned sanctuary of academics, exposed and amenable to neoliberal technologies of change.

## Neoliberalism: inter-disciplinarity's support structure

Neoliberalism[1] is highly "controversial, incoherent, and crisis-ridden" (Venugopal, 2015, p. 166). Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010, p.184) describe it as a "*rascal concept* – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested". This amorphous nature of neoliberalism partly stems from the fact that it has changed in meaning and expanded in usage over the last century. When it emerged in the 1930s, it primarily referred to a collection of largely disarticulated economic ideas that sought to reconstitute nineteenth-century economic liberalism, which ideas opposed the evolving Keynesian political-economic order (Brenner *et al*., 2010). The latter's socialising of the market was seen by the 'proto-neoliberals' as the 'road to serfdom' (Hayek, 1944). No wonder that when it finally ascended to prominence in the 1970s, neoliberalism sought to exploit "strategic vulnerabilities in Keynesianism" (Brenner *et al*., 2010, p. 213), the aim being to 'roll back' the state i.e. the state and the market were viewed as two antagonistic sites which existed in a zero-sum relationship;

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[1] Neoliberalism is not monolithic and uniformly global both geographically and historically. Geographically, its manifestations are dependent on the local context that it encounters. It is for the reason that Brenner at al., (2010) talk of variegated neoliberalisation. It is informed by divergent intellectual traditions such as the Chicago School of neo-classical economics, Freiburg Ordoliberalism and the Virginia School of Public Choice. However, these 'schools' share at least one assumption, that "the state. . .can and should be reformed through a deliberate re-organisation around principles associated with the marketplace." (Davies, in press).

what the market gained, the state lost. Given this thesis, Brenner *et al*., (2010, p. 213) surmise that:

> From its beginnings, then, neoliberal practice…prioritized a series of institutional rollbacks in those sites where vulnerabilities, instabilities and ruptures in the old order presented strategic opportunities for neoliberal modes of intervention.

The rolling back of the state was to be effected through market deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation as well as the withdrawal of the welfare state (Hursh, 2007). These neoliberal nostrums reached the Global South through the activities of, among many others, the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which proffered policy advice (as was the case with Botswana) and/or imposed structural adjustment policies (as was the case in most sub-Sahara African countries) (Tabulawa, 2011). But the 'rolling back' was just a passing phase. By the early 1990s the understanding of neoliberalism as involving the dominance of the market over the state had begun to wane. A new political economy in which the state and market were viewed as mutually constitutive was gaining ground, anchored on the realisation that the two spheres in fact inter-penetrate: the state was needed to promote the market and the market in turn strengthened the state. The regulatory function of the state, not its demise, under this understanding of neoliberalism gained prominence. This is what marks neoliberalism from liberalism: whereas liberalism's vision was of a market that was independent of the state, neoliberalism's vision is that of a market buttressed by the state. That is, a strong state "is a defining feature of neoliberalism" (Davies, in press). Peck, (2008, p. 39) expresses this paradox thus: "neoliberalism's curse has been that it can live neither with, nor without, the state". Another way of capturing this paradox is to distinguish between 'government' and 'governance'; less of the former does not mean less of the latter: "neo-liberalism problematises the state and is concerned to specify its limits through the invocation of individual choice" at the same time as "it involves forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market" (Larner, 1997, p. 12).

That is, neoliberalism is inherently contradictory. It distrusts the bureau-professionals because it views them as inefficient and self-seeking. It is, therefore, determined to reform them through marketisation processes, and it accomplishes this by using the very same state apparatuses it distrusts, which state is simultaneously the object of its (neoliberalism) market principles.

Furthermore, neoliberalism is determined to filter market rationality into areas that hitherto were out of its reach. This 'economising of the social' involves pushing:

> competition and competitive dynamics into areas of social life that are otherwise resistant to entrepreneurial values and ethos, such as universities, and to inculcate people with a respect for competition generally (Davies, in press).

The aim is to transform relations between institutions and citizens on the one hand and the state on the other. Suffusion of the market logic across all spheres of social life is aimed to limit the "interventionist and globalising excesses of the state" (Hopenhayn, 1993, p. 99). This is achieved through the 'responsibilisation' of the individual so that they become entrepreneurs of the self (Peters, 2001). Social risk is transferred from the state to the individual, the net effect being a citizen who is no longer dependent on state welfare. In the process, both the state and citizen are transformed. How was this suffusion of the market logic achieved?

As already argued above, neoliberals' antipathy to 'public monopolies' (e.g. universities) and all kinds of politicised collectives, such as trade unions and professional bodies, made these entities natural targets for reform. But neoliberals were aware that reforming the professions and state bureaucracy needed public support, without which their endevours would never succeed. In a sense, the ground work for their offensive had already been done by postmodernist thinking, which precipitated the 'revolt of the client' against professional expertise in the 1960s, as mentioned above.[2] The mood at the time was that "[the traditional picture of a] distant and peer-responsible professional and a humble ministered-to client [must be replaced by] new forms of participation and a new responsive professional practice" (Gartner, 1969, cited in Haug and Sussman (1969, p. 159). Ever so attentive to cultural politics, neoliberalism appropriated the 'revolt', inflected it, and subsequently mobilised it to exploit Keynesianism's vulnerabilities. This predatory character of neoliberalism is not surprising; it is in its nature to de-/re-

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[2] It is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss the complex relationship between neo-liberalism and post-modernity. Suffice it to state that existing accounts describe their relationship as an 'unholy alliance' (van Zon, 2013, p. 110); 'cultural Siamese twins of late capitalism' (Kachur, 2010, p. 13); and, post-modernity as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (Jameson, 1991). While the two concepts should not be conflated, there is no doubt that they are in some sense inextricably intertwined. Hopenhayn (1993, p. 98) summarised the relationship in these words: 'Postmodernist rhetoric has been profitably capitalized on by neoliberalism in order to update its longed-for project of cultural hegemony'.

articulate, displace, co-habit with and appropriate competing discourses. As Clarke (2008, p.144) states, "neoliberalism involves articulating practices – appropriating other discourses, practices, and even imaginaries and inflecting them". So by exploiting in this way the seductive postmodernist narrative of the 'revolt of the client', neoliberals were able to "legitimize the market offensive [and] make the desires of the public coincide with the promotion of pro-market policies" (Hopenhayn, 1993, p. 98). For example, to justify its onslaught on academics' control of higher education, neoliberals mobilised rhetorical strategies which discursively re-positioned disciplinarity as archaic and a sanctuary for self-seeking professionals, whose relevance, in any case, the public was already questioning. Two such rhetorical strategies are worth elucidating. These are (a) the 'producer-capture' metaphor and (b) knowledge re-purposing.

## Producer-capture

In order to discredit it, neoliberals discursively repositioned bureau-professional power as out-dated and dysfunctional. They exploited the people's general disquiet with it, combined this disquiet with neo-classical economic and public choice theories to invent a neoliberal strategy – 'producer capture' – which they used to discredit professionals generally and academics in particular, casting them as enemies of progress. Producer capture has been described as the:

> process whereby the goals of an organization reflect the interests and prejudices of its employees (the producers) rather than those it is supposed to serve (the consumers, customers or citizens). More precisely, given that workers in a customer-friendly organisation will see their own interests served by serving the customer, capture is evident when producer interests are not aligned with those of the consumers, and it is the former that predominate (McMenamin, C, 2009, http://itslifejimbutnotaswknowit.blogspot.com/2009/02/producer-captureturn-ideological-guns.html.)

Producer capture became a rallying point for neoliberals, who saw professional power as impeding cultivation of an entrepreneurial ethos and values in the university. They started to target teachers, doctors, academics etc. for transformation. This required 'depoliticisation', by which Wilkins (2017, pp. 4–5) means "the removal of certain policies, agents, dialogue, structures, bases or organisations that permit any consolidation of power among politicised 'collectives'. . .with significant bargaining power over claims to how education should be governed". This included universities (as

organisations) and disciplines (as structures), from which academics (agents) derived their power. Through interdisciplinarity, disciplines as structures in which academics insulated themselves from external scrutiny and accountability, were prise opened to expose them to a panoply of market-oriented technologies to turn them into neo-liberal academic subjects.

## Knowledge re-purposing

A strategy more specific to academics was the conversion of knowledge into a "strategic input of new productive processes" (Hopenhayn, 1993, p. 95), i.e. repositioning and re-purposing knowledge as a strategic factor in production. This privileged instrumental knowledge over 'for-its-own-sake' or esoteric knowledge of both CID and disciplinarity, a subtle move to delegitimise both.[3]. To academics, this had a deskilling effect, at the same time providing an opportunity for re-skilling. Knowledge instrumentalisation gave birth to the pervasive discourse of the education (knowledge) – economy nexus. Neoliberals re-purposed education through what Ball (1990) terms a 'discourse of derision', i.e. deriding the separation of education and the economy, calling instead for a closer relationship of the two spheres. Education was blamed for the poor performance of the economy since it was 'failing' to supply the latter with personnel with the right knowledge and skills, but was at the same time presented as the salvation. The result of the 'discourse of derision' was a repositioning of (higher) education as *the* key to national prosperity (Brown & Lauder, 1997) and an important ''tool of microeconomic reform" (Dudley 1998, p. 36). Once cast as a sub-sector of the economy, education could easily now be subjected to market discipline. Now central to the economic reform agenda, (higher) education had to restructure so as to provide ''society with a means of reproducing technically exploitable knowledge in the creation of a trained labour force'' (Delanty, 2001, p. 108). But before this could be possible, this important factor of production (knowledge) had to first be wrest from the control of self-seeking academics. The effects of converting knowledge into a factor of production are captured in the following trends identified by McCowan (2016): (a) instrumentalisation of knowledge i.e. the valuing of knowledge for its instrumental worth rather

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[3] It is partly because of this repurposing of knowledge (i.e. its instrumentalisation) that the 'interdisciples' that arose from CID (e.g. Womens Studies, Gender Studies) find themselves marginalised. The Humanities have had to make concessions to corporate values, argues Donoghue (2008).

than for its intrinsic qualities; (b) application of knowledge and; (c) opening of the university to the outside world. All these trends stand disciplinarity on its head and fundamentally transform the university and its academics.

To sum up this section, inter-disciplinarity, in the form in which it developed in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed at attuning universities, knowledge and academics to the interest of capital. It is not the only devise, though. It is more potent when introduced together with an array of other reforms, such as semesterisation/modularisation, student-centredness and cost recover/sharing mechanisms, geared towards construction of a customer mentality among students and parents. Collectively, these reforms change the identities of students, parents, academics and institutions; education institutions/academics become 'providers' and students 'clients/customers' ready to demand an education that positions them favourably in the labour market (Tabulawa, Polelo & Silas, 2013). Academics are then transformed from in-ward to out-ward looking professionals. New identities and market-responsive subjectivities are fashioned out, hailing the arrival of the neoliberal academic subject.

## Interdisciplinarity at UB

UB's embracing of interdisciplinarity would be appreciated far much better when referenced to higher education developments in postcolonial Africa. The contextualisation I render here is brief, precisely because there is a plethora of literature on the field (see Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996; Wiseman & Wolhuter, 2013). I acknowledge that the contextual factors that have shaped higher education in Africa are many and varied. But there is one that I feel, for the purposes of this paper, is more critical than the others in understanding contemporary developments in higher education in Africa in general and Botswana in particular, and that is the spread of neoliberal tenets (such as privatisation, deregulation, liberalisation and cuts in public spending) from the metropolis to Africa, starting in the 1980s to present. These reforms, packaged in the form of the World Bank-inspired structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), were imposed on many sub-Sahara African (SSA) states. The overarching objective of SAPs was to integrate sub-Saharan Africa into the emerging neoliberal global economy. SAPs' prescriptions for sub-Sahara African countries to cut public spending and reduce indebtedness forced them to divest in higher education and to prioritise primary education, again at the behest of the World Bank on the basis of its 'rates of return analysis', which

'established' that "of all the levels of the education system, primary education was one with the highest public and social returns on public education investment. . ." (Tabulawa, 2011, p. 437). The Bank was to capitulate on this position in the 1990s (at a time when SSA was already reeling in debt and bankruptcy) when the advent of the knowledge economy dictated that knowledge, an important product of universities, was a necessary ingredient for economic development. This repositioning of knowledge in economic development profoundly altered the university-state compact. As the main funder, and also given the growing strategic importance of knowledge, demand for relevance and the spectre of 'schooled unemployment', African states started "demanding accountability and a say in the running of universities" (Wiseman & Wolhuter, 2013, p. 9). This intensified universities' vulnerability e.g. autonomy was attenuated and managerialism[4] entrenched itself as the main framework for running universities. However, these issues of relevance and state-university relations need some nuancing, lest a wrong impression is created that they were predominantly an external imposition. In fact, African universities themselves called for these changes before anyone else did. Yesufu (1973) (as cited in Collins, 2013, p. 26) states that at the 1972 Association of African Universities' Accra Workshop on *Creating the African University: Emerging Issues of the 1970s*, it was declared that "all [African] universities [should] be "development universities" and that it was the "responsibility of governments to steer universities in the development direction". The concept of 'developmental university' implies an activist State in the affairs of the university and therefore, an inherently circumscribed university.

This then was the global context in which UB was born in 1982 – a context of a call for African universities to meet the continent's developmental needs; of a heightened importance of knowledge and the knowledge economy; of a growing demand for higher education; of a global economic crisis; and, of pressure on States to cut public spending. In his graduation address in 1984, the first chancellor of the UB, the late President Quett Masire, stated that:

> The University must produce the much-needed high level manpower to engage in the economic, political and social development of its people. A University in a developing country is part and parcel of the development process. . . . This goes to explain why we invest so much resources in the University (cited in Mokopakgosi, 2008, p. 410).

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4 On the effects of managerialism on an African university, see Mamdani (2007).

UB took note of this call for relevance, and in 1990 it invited an External Review Commission to, among others, provide guidance on the restructuring of the academic organisation of the University. When the academic organisational structure was finally reviewed twenty years later, (instrumental) interdisciplinarity emerged in the review as the preferred mode of knowledge organisation for the institution (University of Botswana, 2010). In the early 2000s interdisciplinarity became a frequent topic in discussions at the university. In his Inauguration Speech as the 3rd Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana, Professor Bojosi Otlhogile mooted interdisciplinarity when he asked rhetorically: "Is 21st century UB still served by the present structures of departments, faculties, centres etc.?" (Otlhogile, 2003, p. 7). At the same occasion, the then Chancellor of UB and President of the Republic of Botswana, Mr Festus Mogae, made this pointed observation:

> Our University must set itself the mission of supplying in full its share of the resources and skills of the economy. What it must not do is descend into an academic institution that exists for *its own sake* and as an *end in itself*, or become a tool in the hands of those who would put it to uses other than those commanded by the national interest… (Mogae, 2003, p. 6. emphasis added).

Both speeches call for changes in the University. Otlhogile is questioning the organisation of the University in terms of disciplines and seems to be suggesting that alternatives should be explored. The Chancellor, on the other hand, raises the broader issue of the *mission* or *purpose* of a university, implying a need to re-purpose it. If the university cannot exist for *its own sake* and as an *end in itself*, then it must serve some instrumental purpose. No sooner had these speeches been delivered than we started seeing developments that clearly aimed at changing the nature of UB. Shaping our Future (2004), UB's first ever strategic plan, was rolled out to run from 2004 to 2009 and beyond, and its revised version, A Strategy for Excellence (2008), was introduced to run from 2009 to 2016 and beyond. These strategic plans were largely responses to external developments, which developments themselves mirrored the global trends described above.

## The policy environment

Neoliberal thinking was mainstreamed in Botswana's development planning through National Development Plans (NDPs), starting with NDP VII (1991/92–1996/97), whose theme emphasised decelerated government

expenditure due to falling revenues. Commitment was made to privatisation, deregulation, economic liberalisation, cost recovery/sharing measures and private sector growth. Here we see an attempt to redefine the state-market-society relationship; the state was to be 'rolled back' by elevating the market: "As the private sector matures, it can be given greater responsibilities for promoting national development, relieving the Government of some of the tasks it necessarily assumed when the private sector was nascent" (Republic of Botswana, 1991, p. 78). This was a major rethink of the Botswana *developmental state*, in which the state was the prime mover in development, but did so without seeking to supplant the market (Tabulawa *et al.*, 2013). Withdrawal of the state was expected to lead to a scaling down of the welfare state. Similar developments in South Africa are reported by Baatjes (2005), who bemoans their implications for higher education in that country.

Public sector reforms reminiscent of the New Public Management (NPM), have since been implemented and are now part and parcel of public sector life in Botswana. These reforms are not an end in themselves, though; their end is to alter the state/society relationship by ultimately producing a responsibilised citizen, one who is an entrepreneur of the self , a 'consumer-citizen' who is not dependent on the state. The education sector has been tasked with producing this kind of citizen, in addition to producing workers for a changed workplace; a workplace that demands sets of skills, knowledge and attitudes congenial with a knowledge-based economy. A re-purposed type of education is needed, one that is in an inextricable nexus with the economy (Republic of Botswana, 2009; 2015). This linking of education and scholarship to the economy and skills development is the main justification for contemporary education reforms globally as nations seek to favourably position themselves in the highly competitive global economic environment (Winberg, 2006; King & McGrath, 2002).

The first step to re-purpose education was taken in 1994 when government released the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE). The RNPE was produced for implementation during NDP VII. The RNPE has been described as Botswana's response to globalisation (Tabulawa, 2009). Its main thrust is linking education with labour market requirements:

> In the past decade rapid economic growth and the resulting changes in the structure of the economy have resulted in shortages of skilled personnel. However, the education system was not structured to respond to the demand (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 3).

Note how the RNPE explains youth unemployment, not as a function of the economy, but of the education system; the economy is doing well, it is the education and training system that is faltering; it is not producing people with the requisite skills to take advantage of available job opportunities created by a supposedly buoyant economy. This marked the beginning of the discourse of derision in education in Botswana. This discourse, as has been argued above, is seductive, precisely because it exploits public anxieties, especially in times of economic distress. It is little surprising that subsequent government policy documents, such as the Tertiary Education Policy (TEP) (2008), National Development Plan 10 (2009 – 2016) and the National Human Resource Development Strategy (2009) all stress how the education system is failing the economy and the need to get this problem addressed. The perceived education-economy disconnect stands out as the main rationale for the Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP) (2015). In the last three policy documents, the discourse assumes an 'economistic' tone, talking of the 'supply-side' (education and training) that is failing to read the cues from the 'demand-side' (industry, employers etc.). This language marks the economy's final subsumption of the education sector.

## University of Botswana's response

The macro-economic policy developments described above did not go unnoticed at UB, particularly government's concerns that the (perceived) education-economy dislocation was harmful to the country's economic well-being. UB's response to this concern came in the form of strategic plans. First was Shaping our Future (2004–2008), followed by its revised version, A Strategy for Excellence (2009–2016). Although they had a broader vision for university education, the two strategic plans had as their motif, the tightening of the 'education-economy nexus'. A Strategy for Excellence*,* in particular, had a more elaborate neoliberal agenda, a feature that is least surprising given the neoliberal context in which it was crafted.

Two related aspects of the agenda ran parallel. The first aimed to transform the academic organisational structure, curriculum and research, with a view to address concerns about relevance and responsiveness to societal needs. The second aspect aimed to open up the University, making it more porous in order to facilitate seamless interaction with its external environment. These thrusts had the potential to transform the University. Interdisciplinarity suited

the realisation of both, through interdisciplinary research and interdisciplinary academic programmes.

## Re-structuring the academic organisational structure, curriculum and research

The restructuring foregrounded inter-disciplinarity. A Strategy for Excellence's Strategic Priority Area 2: Providing Relevant and High Quality Programmes, provided for "[c]oherent academic structures that promote interdisciplinarity" (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 25). There was commitment to a "more efficient course provision and integrated curricula, and new disciplinary relationships including increased interdisciplinarity and decreased departmental compartmentalization" (University of Botswana, 2010, p. 6). This was to be facilitated by a major restructuring of the Faculties and departments, which aimed to weaken the boundaries between disciplines.[5] Furthermore, emphasis on interdisciplinarity was seen as a continuation of the spirit of the semesterisation (with its emphasis on student choice, credit accumulation and learning outcomes) exercise carried out in 2002: "It is important that the University exploits more fully the potentials of the semesterised approach to the curriculum that was introduced in 2002, particularly with regard to interdisciplinarity and student choice" (University of Botswana, 2010, p. 6). Ensor (2004, p. 344) emphasises the 'anti-disciplinary', let alone economic nature of constructs such as credit exchange and student choice:

> The credit exchange discourse…favours modularization of the curriculum, a focus on generic skills and selection from these modules by students to create curriculum packages to meet their own requirements. This discourse also favours interdisciplinarity and portability.

Furthermore, the credit system, with its emphasis on choice, favours a student-centred curriculum. Such curriculum de-centres the academic and re-positions him/her as a:

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[5] This was expected to be achieved through the *Revision of the Academic Organisational Structure* (RAOS) exercise, which sought to merge/disappear Faculties with a view to create new academic structures which would be porous and flexible. This exercise was crafted as UB's response to the charge of a dislocation between the needs of the economy/society and the products of tertiary education. However, it has not been implemented in full.

> 'facilitator rather than expert, one who places emphasis on competence or skills rather than knowledge, or content. In other words, the vertical pedagogic relations associated with academic apprenticeship into domain-specific knowledge favoured by a disciplinary discourse are explicitly eschewed (Ensor, 2004, p. 347).

All these constructs (student-centredness, credit accumulation and student choice) are central to curriculum reform, in particular semesterisation, at UB. Naturally, they are not compatible with disciplinary knowledge arrangements. They deconstruct the discipline, allowing for interdisciplinary re-arrangement of knowledge, and introduce flexibility in the way the student assembles a degree programme (Tabulawa *et al*., 2013). Not only that, and as Ensor (2004) observes, they also alter fundamentally student-teacher pedagogic relations; the power to control these relations is wrested from the teacher. Student power is further enhanced through promotion of a customer mentality; the student-as-customer's satisfaction with the quality of 'service' is to be established through, among others, graduate satisfaction surveys (University of Botswana, 2008). Once positioned as customers, students are expected to put pressure on the university to "make courses more relevant to the skills they require for the workplace" (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 268). These developments are beginning to impact UB considerably. Implementation of the TEP (2008) has led to a phenomenal growth of the private tertiary education sector (from one degree-offering institution to the current five) (Tabulawa and Youngman, 2017), giving students alternatives to UB. For academic year 2016/17, UB failed to meet its quota by almost 2000 students, raising questions about its competitiveness vis-à-vis private institutions. A junior Minister in the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology is reported as having told UB to 'adapt' if it is to survive the competition (Morima, 2016). In Government's view, students' newly found identity as 'consumers' of tertiary education is beginning to steer the sector.

## Research

In 2008 the University of Botswana approved the University Research Strategy (URS), which foregrounded inter-disciplinarity and knowledge instrumentalisation:

> A new emphasis will be given to the *impact* of research on the wider society and the goal of ensuring that research has tangible *public benefits*, so that wherever possible new knowledge is turned into action, *innovation*, products or services. Thus encouragement and incentives will be given to research proposals that clearly specify how dissemination and

> *application* will be undertaken and impact achieved (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 6, emphasis added).

Note the emphasis on an instrumentalist view of research knowledge in the URS: 'impact', 'public benefits', 'innovation' and 'application'. There does not seem to be room for 'blue sky' research that traditionally defines university research. The instrumental view of research and its outputs features prominently in *A Strategy for Excellence* as well through an emphasis on research 'impact', to be facilitated by "involvement of users of research (business, government, civic society) in the ERA [External Research Assessment]" (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 28). This valuation of 'applied' research relative to 'basic' research blurs the divide between knowledge production and knowledge application, leading to a 'Mode 2' knowledge production system (Gibbons *et al*., 1994; Cloete & Bunting, 2000). Under this arrangement, increasingly academics account to external bodies, no longer to themselves in their constricting circles. Diminishing research funding that is accompanying a growing expectation for UB academics to 'research and publish' is forcing them to seek external research funding from research grants agencies, the very same agencies that foreground interdisciplinarity in research grants proposals. This is a fertile ground for transforming academics into 'academic entrepreneurs'.

Further, the URS encourages "increased [research] collaboration amongst staff, particularly on inter-disciplinary research projects" (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 4). The strategy identifies seven priority research themes, which are expected to be inter-disciplinary in orientation. 'Priority' was determined in terms of a theme's potential contribution to the national research and innovation system, an expectation on universities clearly stated in the TEP (2008). However, 'incentivised' research themes limit what academics can research on i.e. they define what constitutes legitimate research 'problems'. So the idea of research themes takes away academics' traditional responsibility to define research problems. This responsibility is transferred to outside bodies (e.g. research councils) and academics' role is that of executing research agendas set elsewhere.

Although they have not been discussed here in detail as neoliberal technologies, elsewhere the innovations (i.e. the credit system, student-centredness, semesterisation, student choice and learning outcomes) noted above have been found to foreground interdisciplinarity as a technology of change (Ensor, 2004; Moore, 2003). Collectively, they have the potential to

disrupt the power academics wield, which power is often viewed as impeding the transformation of the University into an institution responsive to the needs of a neo-liberal, market-based economy. However, there is no inevitability about such transformation occurring. After all, even the most hegemonic of practices are often countered, contested and even resisted. We would be better off heeding Clarke's (2008, p. 138) distinction between "the presence of [interdisciplinarity] almost everywhere, and whether it is everywhere dominant". The distinction suggests that interdisciplinarity is not monolithic in its effects. Indeed, accounts of academics and administrators across generations both resisting and facilitating neoliberalism in general (Churchman & King, 2009; Peters, Marginson & Murphy, 2009) and interdisciplinarity in particular (Martimianakis & Muzzin, 2015) have been noted.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to illustrate the potential of a particular strand of interdisciplinarity, (instrumental interdisciplinarity), to transform the university and its academics. I have argued that through seemingly apolitical 'technologies' such as interdisciplinarity, higher education is increasingly becoming implicated in knowledge capitalism. Mbembe (2016) lists the effects of this emerging governing rationality, among which are; subordination of politics to capital and; commodification of knowledge. These developments mobilise particular identities, one of which is the casting of academics as 'knowledge workers' or 'entrepreneurs' and universities as production sites for instrumental knowledge. This is emasculating, and interdisciplinarity is central to the process. The same way the relevance debate somehow justified the State's interference in university affairs, interdisciplinarity might justify the capture of the university by corporate interests. Hearn's (2003) warning is worth heeding:

> Here, we can see how the rubric of "interdisciplinarity" functions as a Trojan horse, smuggling external political and economic interests inside the wall of the academy. And so "interdisciplinarity" becomes a sign or a code word. Cloaked in the rhetoric of academic freedom and innovation, "interdisciplinarity" can serve as a rationale and as a source of legitimation for private interests and corporate-style institutional arrangements inside the academy.

While such capture is not self-evident at UB, there are nonetheless concerns with the growing influence of government bureaucrats whose numbers have increased considerably in the University Council with successive reviews of the University Act (Tabulawa & Youngman, 2017). Paradoxically, the same interdisciplinarity is also central to the modernisation of the university and its continued relevance in the midst of profound change. This puts academics in a quandary – should they resist the disciplining technology of inter-disciplinarity and render themselves irrelevant, or embrace it, thereby participating in their own emasculation, or, given the possibility of 'multiple identities', live in both worlds in relative (in)security? Addressing this quandary would be an important aspect of re-imagining higher education.

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