

## **Hired Hands**

### **Casualised Technology and Labour in the Teaching of Cultural Studies**

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KIERYN MCKAY AND KYLIE BRASS

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#### —INTRODUCTION

In the competitive marketplace of higher education, popular media technologies have been embraced for their transformative communicative potential in the classroom and beyond. These technologies promise to catalyse and democratise communications between the academy and its publics, not only as emancipatory teaching tools which tap into students' everyday habits, but as vehicles for publicity and markers of progress within institutions. At the same time as we are witnessing the uptake of new media technologies across a range of settings in the tertiary sector, pressures associated with the massification of higher education in Australia (and more globally) and shifts wrought by corporate management models are also having an impact on the ways courses are delivered. Alternative delivery methods and cost-saving labour practices are being explored and exploited in these contexts to the extent that a significant and increasing portion of academic work is now being effectively 'outsourced'. In this article we explore the uses of casual labour and new media technologies as factors that have critical impact upon practices of learning

and teaching in cultural studies and related fields. In particular, we examine the uptake and application of one such technology (podcasting) at a contingent place and time—when the authors were both employed as casual tutors (among many) on large-scale first-year communications and cultural studies courses at the University of Western Sydney in late 2008. In that year, these courses began harnessing podcasting technology for the first time, essentially as a means to disseminate recorded lectures to the student body.

We argue that there is a parallel between the appropriation of podcasting technology into the university and the current system of casual academic employment in Australia, in that both the podcast and the casual academic represent ‘new’ interfaces of outsourced academic labour. As casual teachers in cultural studies we have written this article from an embedded perspective which conceptualises both the podcast and the casual academic in line with the most prevalent mode of their employment in the academy: as ‘hired hands’, appendages to traditional models of pedagogy. The hired hand is an appendage in this conceptualisation, that draws on its traditional definition as a hand maiden (‘in the service of’) but also turns on other usages such as ‘in hand’ meaning ‘under control and subject to discipline’. The idea of the almost prosthetic ‘hand’ is that it has the potential to materialise as a cyborg, though in the teaching contexts we’re speaking to in this article the graft or join is not integrated or seamless.<sup>1</sup> The article maps out the limits of technological innovation within the teaching of cultural studies, as well as its limits in promoting the radical potential of a cultural studies approach. And it charts some of the effects and affects of an over-reliance on casualised labour, which we argue can have a profoundly destabilising and atomising impact on academic practice and student engagement.

#### —PODCASTING PEDAGOGY

In recent years, podcasts—audio media files that can be downloaded via the internet and stored on a computer or portable media device for playback—have been put to use in a range of pedagogical settings across the Australian higher education landscape and, increasingly, as a marketing tool. University websites feature podcasted public lectures and interviews with academics and students, which not only showcase talent, but also serve to differentiate a university from its rivals. Like

other public institutions in the 'age of privatization, quasi-markets and private-public partnerships', universities have become 'increasingly promotionalized',<sup>2</sup> to the point where 'the elements of challenging and asserting oneself against one's 'fellow players' are central to the functioning of academia'.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the high uptake of podcasts in the US academic context, Buxton et al. speculate that if:

the prediction that by 2011 American law students will be, in part, basing their choice of law school on the availability of podcast lectures [then] adoption of podcast lectures may become an act of competitive necessity.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the podcast functions as a form of distinction 'to improve one's standing in relation to others'.<sup>5</sup> In an environment of heightened competition for students, capital funds and research income, podcasts (and other popular media technologies) act as a 'badge of efficiency' for the university keen to represent itself as functionally and symbolically progressive, and as 'keyed-in' to the changing desires and demands of its student populace.<sup>6</sup>

Podcasts, though seemingly untethered and unbound, are in fact deeply 'embedded in pedagogic and other social relations'.<sup>7</sup> Chan, Lee and McLoughlin observe of student cohorts at Charles Sturt University, that 'these [mobile media] devices have a high level of social cachet, particularly with younger students'.<sup>8</sup> There is an analogy to be drawn between the accrual of 'cultural capital' at the individual student level and the institutional brand logic cited above.<sup>9</sup> In a highly competitive market access to new media can be said to represent a form of cultural capital for the 'academic distinction' it generates.<sup>10</sup>

The transition to the podcast from more established forms of lecture recording or lecturecasting can be attributed to a wider social uptake of mobile media technologies. The incorporation of these technologies into the world of academe is configured in response to 'an awareness of ascribed Net Generation characteristics and preferences for mobility, accessibility and online communications' on the part of the student, and frequently attributed to the evolution of an apparent 'student cyborg', whose tech-absorption is seen to frustrate (and be frustrated by) traditional pedagogical practice.<sup>11</sup> Teaching this student cohort has particular challenges:

'They're downloading porn, browsing Facebook, playing solitaire and trying to listen to the lecture, all at the same time', [Law Professor] Tim Blackmore says. 'These students have every imaginable kind of data and

media available to them. Always. This isn't the MTV generation we're talking about—this is the everything, all-the-time generation. It's difficult for a professor to compete with that. It's like trying to capture the attention of a cat.'<sup>12</sup>

The increasing emphasis on podcasts is also, at another level, a corporate institutional response to the demands of precarious time across a range of labour contexts. For institutions, there has been a 'sector-wide embrace of technology to cater to student demand' because contemporary student cohorts often have 'quite burdensome work obligations'.<sup>13</sup> A large share of the scholarship on e-learning and mobile media advances in higher education attests to the potential of podcasting toward delivering convenient, customised and engaging course materials, which offer students 'flexibility to manage competing claims on time'.<sup>14</sup> For academics, too, 'the apportioning, measuring, stealing, subcontracting, bartering, "stretching" and modularising, managing as well as finding time constitute one of the major preoccupations of surviving (academic work)'.<sup>15</sup> This presents some intersections with the plight of casual academics who, as we will explore later in this article, are already 'modularised' by their employment conditions. As early as 2000 an Australian study found that 'the demand for quality in teaching is putting many academics under enormous pressure' and the pressure to adapt to technologically enhanced pedagogy is not without its costs: 'two thirds of ... academics report that developing course materials for new technologies has had a major impact on their changing work hours'.<sup>16</sup> An examination of the value of the podcast in a range of educational settings seems particularly warranted in an Australian context.

Of the literature in circulation about the pedagogical application of podcasts in universities, the vast majority is positive.<sup>17</sup> However, as Lee has pointed out, from the standpoint of a learning and development practitioner there is a 'need to make a conscious effort to evaluate both new as well as existing technologies and how we use them from a pedagogical point of view'.<sup>18</sup> Since 'the impact of new technologies depends crucially on their social context' it is important to consider the podcasting experience within its academic frameworks.<sup>19</sup> The pedagogical deployment of the podcast within the university can be characterised as being in a transitional phase—slipping between different functions and usages: as lecture supplement, as partial replacement and, increasingly, as a simulacrum of the lecture itself. Despite the

increasing prominence of the podcast in the tertiary learning environment, and perhaps because of the variable uptake and application of this technology, it's often little more than a straightforward audio recording of the 'real' lecture—a mobile update of the lecturecast offered by universities at least since the 1970s. In this sense, and in other ways we will go on to explore, the podcast appends to and perpetuates existing transmission models of pedagogy.

—TRADITIONAL MODELS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ACADEME

Certain ideas about teaching and, in turn, teaching methodologies continue to have currency in the contemporary university. While there might be a range of alternative strategies, it is more than likely that a student will come across some form of the conventional pedagogical model that posits the teacher as all-knowing repository of information and the student as a passive recipient. Even if these traditional subject positions are not now, or ever have been, watertight, their symbolism remains central to the performance of pedagogy in the academy.

Dating from the Platonic model of *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, where the older male teacher was the standard model of intellectual authority, the student was viewed not simply as an empty receptacle, but as having knowledge that the teacher would draw out. This classical model relied on a pairing of teacher and student that assumed a relationship which was not reciprocal, but which was determined by a one-way lineage. With a neat link to literary terminology, this relationship has been read as an echo of 'the fiction of the perfect play between the poet and his ideal reader', the lineage depending for its intelligibility on a reduction of what is plural to an 'imagined interplay of paired elements: of poet and tradition, poet and reader, teacher and student'.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, pedagogy becomes not just a form of transference but redaction, relying not only on binary logic but also on a model of transmission commonly used in linguistic and education parlance to signify the flow of information of 'meaning' and 'intention' in the teacher–student contract.

Unsurprisingly, the instructional or expository model of lecture-style teaching has been a favoured method. Obviously, lectures make practical (economic) sense in reaching large student audiences. The time-honoured combination of lectures and tutorials is still the standard teaching routine especially for large undergraduate courses. In principle, this combination enacts a theory–practice binary, where

information dissemination is the province of the lecture and tutorials work at honing students' analytical skills and competencies. Traditionally, then, lectures operate on transmission pedagogical models, where interaction and dialogue are marginal.

While traditionally lectures are augmented by visual support (tendered by black or whiteboard, overhead or PowerPoint presentation, for example), sonically, conventional forms of the lecture are about the teacher's voice in broadcast. From here, the transition from the live to the recorded lecture (with similarly mediated visuals) does not seem a stretch. But the lecture is not just about the material experience, it is also about what is 'beyond' the material, in a non-utilitarian sense. As Tony Thwaites has argued, 'no teacher, of course, holds that teaching can be reduced to the movement of information from one point to another'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the pedagogical experience can 'never quite [be] absorbed into the models of IT'.<sup>22</sup> From the vantage of media studies, Sterne et al. consider warily, but also optimistically, the potential of podcasting as a 'realisation of an alternative cultural model of broadcasting'.<sup>23</sup>

—THE CULTURAL STUDIES PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

Cultural studies has always prided itself on its activist pedagogic practices. Paul Salzman made an important point on this subject when he argued that the assumption that 'the teaching of cultural studies is at some fundamental level the teaching of popular culture itself, rather than the teaching of a certain methodology' is unproductive.<sup>24</sup> His argument, in concert with John Frow's, was that cultural studies should not try to perpetuate existing readings and pedagogic processes. Instead, it should develop a methodology that 'supposes a pedagogy in which students are at least as fully in control of much of the subject matter as are the teachers'.<sup>25</sup> In what Frow called a sort of 'reverse anthropology', cultural studies potentially opens up a radical form of pedagogy, treating students as informants about popular culture.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the methodologies of cultural studies are able to value non-traditional, experiential kinds of knowledge.

Cultural studies, then, 'knows' that students are often far better versed in certain domains and experiences than their teachers. As a 'discipline' that grafts together literary critical, historical and sociological modalities in the study of

popular culture and everyday life, cultural studies has the potential to realign the teacher–student dyad, decentring the teacher’s authority and instating the student as ‘informant’. At its most undomesticated cultural studies ushers into the academy activist and alternative pedagogies that challenge conventional models. Cultural studies, it has been claimed, ‘is a way of being in the academy, academic or not quite academic’, which ‘means prioritising agendas from outside the academy, being critical of academic limits’.<sup>27</sup> However, Ien Ang reminds us that in taking seriously the ‘material conditions of our own professional and intellectual practice’ we need to be mindful that:

the institutional environment within which we carry out our work has changed considerably over the last two decades. Academics are increasingly bound by the requirements imposed on them by the corporate university and the government policies that guide it.<sup>28</sup>

Over a decade on from Salzman and Frow’s exchange, the teaching of cultural studies across Australia may be characterised as highly contextual, or as Chris Healy has described it ‘situational’ or even ‘parochial’.<sup>29</sup> In Australia there is little uniformity—or, arguably, disciplinarity—to the institutional practice and teaching of cultural studies. As such, cultural studies may be encountered as predominantly media communications based, or allied with literary studies, or film studies, or grafted to cognate disciplines such as sociology. At the University of Western Sydney, the cultural studies ‘curriculum’ traverses (at least) the schools of Communication Arts, and Humanities and Languages. It is from the authors’ experiences in contingent positions as casual teachers within these schools that adopt contingent forms of cultural studies that we seek to address questions of teaching and technological innovation. We are not claiming ours is an aggregate or representative experience by any means; in fact, we would argue that differentiation is the hallmark of casualised academia and that the material reality of casual teaching varies, often quite markedly, from institution to institution, across disciplines and between courses, and from person to person.

—THE CASUALISATION OF THE ACADEMIC WORKFORCE

Over the course of the past two decades, there have been considerable changes to the size and composition of Australia’s academic workforce. Demographic studies

have homed in on the ramifications of the workforce's ageing profile, but have also charted a marked shift in contractual and employment conditions over this time. In the past fifteen years there has been a 'considerable slowdown' in full-time staff numbers across all disciplinary fields, with the only real growth in the sector in the area of contract and casual staff.<sup>30</sup> Since the 1990s there has been an increasing reliance on casual and non-continuing contract staff in Australian universities. This growth has most particularly been in the area of sessional teaching.<sup>31</sup> Yet official higher education staffing statistics, collected by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) chronically underestimate casual figures.<sup>32</sup> In a recent report, Coates and Goedegebuure suggest that the actual sessional count may be 'closer to a 40 per cent rather than [the official figure of] 20 per cent of the academic workforce'.<sup>33</sup> Other reports suggest that between a third and a half of all undergraduate teaching in Australian universities is done by casual staff.<sup>34</sup> Coates and Goedegebuure forecast that we can expect a future in which 'around a third of all staff are sessional and more staff are employed on a fixed-term than tenured basis' a reality which is 'consistent with that of the USA'.<sup>35</sup>

The prevalence of casual labour has been directly attributed to Australian universities' strong embrace of the 'international trend towards increased use of non-continuing staffing to mitigate the costs of moving from an elite to a mass higher education system in a context of public funding constraint'.<sup>36</sup> In practical terms, as one commentator puts it, what this amounts to is that within universities 'devolved management [of tight budgets] has been a transmission belt for casualisation'.<sup>37</sup> So, what does the increasing casualisation mean for academic work? Some would argue that the proliferation of sessional work actually indicates that 'in mass higher education systems the role of the academic has become far more diversified and fragmented'.<sup>38</sup> Academic work has become increasingly modularised to the extent that it is essentially about 'managing a portfolio consisting of discrete parcels of activity many of which ... can be delegated'.<sup>39</sup> In this view, sessionalisation is not a deviation from the norm but, in fact, the new norm for academic work.

In a higher education context in which 'frontline workers'—those 'who operate at the interface between the organization and its customers or clients'<sup>40</sup>—have become progressively more important this would seem to place, as the figures above attest, disproportionate stress on casual employees. It is important to also ask, then,

what are the implications of this for reliability and quality of education provision when so many of these frontline teachers are employed on a highly contingent basis? Sessional teachers are often appended to courses at late notice, unable to contribute in any sustained way to curricula, to be involved in even routine management decisions, or access structured forms of professional development. Beyond the operational and practical questions about the quality of service provision we want to also pursue the implications for academic subjectivity—and from there tap into wider discussions around precarity and the 'labour of identity'.<sup>41</sup>

We concede that there are positive aspects of the casual experience which work to the mutual benefit of the organisation and the employee. Flexible employment arrangements will suit the higher degree research student who takes on casual teaching to supplement their stipend and gain professional experience, 'moonlighting' industry professionals, or emeriti whose trimmed-down teaching load keeps them in touch with the academy. But we would contend that there is a material difference in status across the spectrum of sessional staff, many of whom are research-qualified individuals trying to forge an academic career, often serving out their time as early-career researchers and teachers on interminable short-term contracts, and that the positives that accrue from flexibility are often outweighed or tempered by an overarching experience of disenfranchisement. There is a very real concern that within universities 'sessional staff have become an underclass'.<sup>42</sup> Barrett contends that '[t]his group of people are treated as if they were yet another factor of production whose cost needs to be minimalised in order to maximise profits'.<sup>43</sup>

Since the demand for casual teaching is primarily contingent on course enrolments, and since student numbers are rarely settled far ahead of the teaching semester casual teachers are employed at short notice in a situation where human resource management devolves to course convenors. It is often difficult for these coordinating staff to go about the hiring of casuals in any systematic or purposeful way. Precarious hiring practices, then, mean that casual tutors often teach courses outside or only tangentially connected to their disciplinary backgrounds. The precariousness of this employment by definition offers only limited stability, even for those fortunate enough to string together a full-time-equivalent teaching load for extended periods of time, since 'casual academic employment is based on re-

engagements from one teaching session to the next, always uncertain, and punctuated by unpaid breaks'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, as Junor argues, 'the insecurity of casual work itself [is] a regulatory construct', a pervasive factor of academic identity for staff and for the university as an organisation.<sup>45</sup>

Andrew Ross has observed of the US higher education sector, 'the combination of work-force casualisation—at a rate unequalled in any profession—with the emergent expansion of offshore higher education may prove to be one of the most illustrative examples of the new geography of work'.<sup>46</sup> Melissa Gregg, drawing on the work of Ross, demonstrates that casual academic staff are part of 'a volunteer low-wage army' for whom 'low compensation for a high workload' has become 'a rationalized feature of the job'.<sup>47</sup> Certainly at present, 'hourly casual academic rates under-compensate for actual hours of preparation, follow-up, administration and maintenance of disciplinary currency'.<sup>48</sup> Casual tutors do significant amounts of unpaid work—attending lectures, marking short assignments and in-class presentations, consulting with students, responding to emails, uploading online supplement materials. A report prepared by the National Tertiary Education Union documents some of the practices at the University of Western Sydney:

Casuals are not paid to consult with students, or for administration. When assessments are due there are generally floods of emails, doctors' notes, objections and requests from students, and in some schools no time or money is allocated for anyone to deal with these student matters.<sup>49</sup>

Casual loading does not adequately compensate for these invisible tasks, 'nor does it compensate for lack of increments, lost time between engagements, and differential access to other sources of security, such as superannuation, career paths, representation rights and physical facilities'.<sup>50</sup> Some of these factors are difficult if not impossible for the university to safeguard against. But casual tutors are also precluded from incremental pay progression, casual academic trajectories are not incentivised, and there is no monetary reward or recognition for experience. Indeed, at present the only gradation embedded within tutor pay scales is that marked by the acquisition of a doctoral qualification. Feasibly, then, one can teach at a university on a casual but consistent basis for thirty years and be paid the same money as a 'rookie' tutor embarking upon their debut teaching semester. Thus, 'in effect, the long-term casual is donating unpaid time in maintaining communication,

updating disciplinary currency, and developing expertise that is not rewarded through salary increments'.<sup>51</sup>

Casuals are also often excluded from other forms of merit-based incentive. At the University of Western Sydney, for example, casual tutors are ineligible for teaching excellence awards. Moreover, university casuals are 'largely outside of formal training programs and career path development associated with skill accreditation'<sup>52</sup> and tend to have haphazard, limited or no access to professional development within the university. If professional development is made available to casuals, it is often with the understanding that they will not be paid for their time or investment. This further frustrates skill progression and solidification, where the casual staff member is faced with the choice of opting out of formal training or offering up yet more hours to the university free of charge. Reciprocally, this casualisation 'has a profound impact on tenured staff [since they] must recruit and manage teachers who in turn have no access to training or support, and whose role is constrained by a minimalist contract system'.<sup>53</sup>

#### —CASUAL IDENTITIES

Churchman writes of 'shared stories of marginalization' where the casual academic is made to feel on the periphery of the teaching body.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Barrett tenders that 'casual lecturers are becoming increasingly isolated from each other and other staff members of the school or faculty [and that] isolation from other staff members is compounded by the physical isolation from the workplace'.<sup>55</sup> Churchman agrees, observing that, 'for sessional academic staff, isolation often is the result of the more practical issue of lack of space and personal computers on campus which means they have no office area in which to work, so spend little time on campus outside teaching hours'.<sup>56</sup> The isolation embodied by this placelessness within the geography of the campus (and, more specifically, a denial of office space embedded within professional communal academic space) disenfranchises the casual academic from working conditions that more legitimate members of the academy more readily access. This relegation to the periphery can be read as a literal and figurative reinforcement of placelessness at the university.

This isolation both contributes to and is compounded by the detachment of the casual academic from permanent academic citizenry. Churchman continues:

While there are physical factors which may result in sessional workers being isolated from their colleagues, emotional isolation due to the attitudes of some continuing academic staff also impacts on the sense of identity experienced by sessional academics. The temporary mode of employment and resultant lack of relevant information and understanding about the organisation, reduces their potential to be active participants in discussions about the courses that they teach.<sup>57</sup>

In this context it is unsurprising that Junor's survey concluded that 'the strongest message conveyed by survey respondents was their desire for a voice, respect and inclusion'.<sup>58</sup> But this lack of involvement in the development of curricula is not the only consequence of this systemic isolation. Indeed:

limited access to organizational communication and little interaction with their academic colleagues resulted in ignorance of much of the language and shifting context of academia ... [where] ... understandings of their organisation, roles and relationships with organizational others ... appear [too] to have been constructed in relative isolation.<sup>59</sup>

In the context of cultural studies, casualisation has become so entrenched in the trajectory of an academic career that, as Gregg observes, 'it is clear that the structural regularity of shorter contracts and casual employment now means that a sense of employee insecurity is a deeply ingrained feature of the early stages of a career'.<sup>60</sup> The 'academic apprenticeship' which, though never an official employment configuration, once operated to shepherd a doctoral student into an academic career, has devolved into a fragmented sessional teaching and short-term research posts. This sense of multiplicity and of fragmentation pervades every aspect of the casual's mentality, such that the coherence implied by Gregg's phrase 'early stages of a career' is itself misleading. With no guarantee that casual work will lead to continuing employment, it is impossible for the early academic to hypothesise the probability of a 'career' of any kind. Further, the precariousness of hiring practices that leads to the frequent dislocation of the casual academic from their field of research disables the kinds of agency necessary to the success of any endeavour to build teaching experience within a specific area of expertise.

May, Campbell and Burgess caution that 'far from being the price of progress, casualisation and enhanced management prerogative may be a barrier to progress',

and there is a very real risk that prolonged casualisation in an academic context may 'depress innovation and dynamic productivity'.<sup>61</sup> Current innovations for podcasting in universities may also prove counterproductive for the cultural studies pedagogical project. In the following section, we take up some of these issues in specific pedagogical settings.

—'CASUAL' APPROACHES TO PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNICATIONS

In 2008, Kieryn had been teaching for five years on a Communication Arts course that surveys the history of communication technologies and their cultural impacts. As a core first year course, enrolments—usually of around 650 students—always exceed the maximum capacity of the university's largest lecture theatre which offers only 500 seats. Rather than pay for or organise the delivery of repeat lectures, a decision was made to hold a 'simulcast' lecture. The process was: 500 students were assigned seating in the 'real' lecture hall, where they were to enjoy a traditional lecture experience, while 150 students were assigned to a satellite theatre. The lecture audio was streamed through Skype, and Kieryn, the hostess at the second site, flicked PowerPoint slides, distributed handouts, and took questions at the end of class.

The experience of what the students and Kieryn referred to as the 'ghost lecture' was similar to that of the traditional lecture, but in every sense mediated. All access to the goings on of the 'real' lecture was filtered by technology, or by Kieryn. The figurehead of the lecture, the orator, was invisible to them, out of sight and out of reach. They were bound by the strictures of the lecture, the timetabled slot, a structured dissemination of material they could not interrupt nor relieve themselves from—yet the architecture of the lecture hall enforced and highlighted an absence. The arrangement of their seats forced a continued acknowledgement of the fact that they were looking to something that was not there. They were disallowed their point of convergence—the body language, the gesturing, the facial expressions, that assimilate the technological and the personal, that form the backbone of lecture oratory. Those in the satellite classroom shared an open secret: theirs was an illegitimate form, a cheapened version, of the 'real' thing.

Kylie's experience involved teaching in an introductory sociology course in the first year Bachelor of Arts program. In the second semester of 2008 there was an

intake of 750 students. The course was taught in the relatively common delivery model of a weekly program of a one hour lecture per week and a one hour tutorial, so theoretically there was two hours of face-to-face teaching a week. What distinguished this course from the more conventional course delivery, however, was the inaugural use of podcasted lectures to help manage the over-enrolment of three times the number of student bodies that could be catered for in the available space.

In Kylie's course the decision was made to deliver lectures every week, following the traditional model, but this time to a rotating roster of students. Rather than simulcast the lecture (as in Kiernyn's course) the students alternately attended one face-to-face lecture, then accessed two weeks of podcasted lectures that they had not been 'permitted' to attend on campus. Students either listened to these while rooted to a computer or while they were 'on the move' as downloaded, mobile MP3 files. The podcast was not surplus nor was it considered a supplement to the lecture, it was, for two out of every three weeks, the 'real deal' substitute for students who were essentially not authorised to turn up to a lecture they had not enrolled to attend. For the first few weeks there was high attendance in the lecture theatre, but by week five numbers had seriously declined and at its lowest point Kylie counted 25 people in the lecture theatre (including herself).

These uses of the podcast, which perpetuate transmission models of academic pedagogy, far from uphold Frow's 'reverse anthropology' and are at odds with contemporary beliefs regarding good teaching practice in cultural studies. As monologic, unidirectional repositories of information, these podcasts comprise an expanding aural environment that effectively silences students, especially in large, unwieldy classes: in our experience students were not encouraged to contribute their own podcasts to course websites, and were only able to interact with the online information in a limited capacity, which had consequences for their engagement with the subject at hand. The time demands of implementing podcasting and e-learning for academic staff has a particular impact on casual academic staff who are rarely, if ever, paid for time spent listening to the podcasts, although tutors are expected to draw on the lecture content in their tutorials and as they assess their students' work.

At the time of teaching these courses, students in first year cultural studies subjects at the University of Western Sydney were overtly challenging the role of the

podcast, bringing into question the limits of its academic value and the relevance of its application to the learning environment, and petitioning the university to review its usage. In September 2008, *The Australian* published an article in its Higher Education supplement, entitled 'Australian Students Reject Paying for "Virtual" Lectures'.<sup>62</sup> The article gave voice to a first-year University of Western Sydney Arts student, Tammy Lawlor, who expressed disquiet at the university's progressive use of podcasting as a 'replacement' for lectures. The article addressed the experience from an economic value angle: students were paying good money for what they felt was a lessened, derivative experience, and thus felt they were getting inadequate return on their educational investment. What Lawlor touches on here is the progressing commodification of knowledge by the university, where 'what is being sold is increasingly not a contract with expertise, but a license to access certain content'.<sup>63</sup>

Lawlor was dissatisfied with what she called 'the isolated learning experience', explaining that 'I think a podcast is an inadequate replacement. A lecture is better for the atmosphere involved'.<sup>64</sup> Even though new media are celebrated for tapping into 'digital natives' ease with and predilection for networked or convergent engagement, many students are actually nostalgic for what they consider 'authentic' pedagogies. Lawlor said she welcomed podcasts as a complement to, but not as a substitute for, scholarly interaction.

The student backlash, such as it was, brought to the forefront for us lingering concerns about the podcast being deployed as a 'hired hand'—a form of outsourced academic labour, appended to traditional models of tertiary learning (not unlike our own experiences as sessional teachers). The 'unplugging' of the student from the university can be linked to the invisible or rootless experience of the casual academic. It raised a number of questions: Does the introduction of the podcast mean a diminished authority and authenticity of the lecture? Since the introduction of this 'new' commodity seemed to validate and privilege certain communications practices—the mobile, the personalised, and the consumerist—what happens to models of student-centred learning when the podcast is in the hands of students not as collaborators and co-producers, but as atomised, individual consumers?

Within the humanities, the lecture features as the primary mechanism of the transitional model. Tutorials and set readings act as complements to the lecture, which is positioned as the authentic, authorised, first encounter with learning. But, as claimed by Shirley Alexander, Dean of Education at UTS, ‘a lecture is not just a dissemination of information ... Lectures can be and should be a lot more than that’.<sup>65</sup> Thus there is something about the lecture that is un-reproduced and irreproducible by the podcast. With the mechanical reproduction of the lecture, however, ‘that which withers’ is an aura of authenticity.

For Benjamin, ‘even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.<sup>66</sup> It is this spatial and temporal specificity that lends the lecture its importance and whatever claims to authenticity may be viable: that a lecture is unique to its timeslot, which usually pre-exists the tutorial, and its performance in a particular space, usually a lecture hall, the architecture of which reinforces its teacher-centred identity. In this sense, ‘the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity’,<sup>67</sup> and where the podcast offers a mechanical reproduction of a lecture, it necessarily offers a less authentic version of its original, in that ‘the quality of its presence is always depreciated’.<sup>68</sup> Also, since ‘the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition’<sup>69</sup> podcasts are at once subject to, and dislocated from, the tradition of teacher-based pedagogy they perpetuate. Thus, their vulnerabilities are evident. That mechanical reproduction ‘jeopardizes the historical testimony’<sup>70</sup> is a salient point, since a good lecture in cultural studies must always be timely. This point is likely to gain more urgency in the future, as podcasts are increasingly *replayed*, rather than *reproduced*.

Of course in many ways the podcast offers more than the lecture, since ‘technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself’.<sup>71</sup> The podcast, then, ‘enables the original to meet the beholder halfway’.<sup>72</sup> Previous formats of the recorded lecture did this, in that they offered some flexibility of access. But the introduction of the downloadable digital podcast offers in its mobility almost total liberation of the lecture from its spatial and temporal constraints. The ‘halfway’ is no longer bound by the PC or the

library carrel as with the lecturecast, but rather only by the limits of where an MP3 player can be ported.

Here we recall what Tammy Lawlor labelled 'the isolated learning experience'. What Lawlor gestures towards is that which is obvious—that sitting in a lecture hall and listening to a recording are vastly different experiences. Even a traditional unidirectional lecture offers the possibility of interaction with others—with students sitting beside you, with the lecturer at the end of class. The podcast, however, extracts the lecture from its location via its mobility and enables, even encourages, the 'isolation' to which Lawlor refers.

While the lecture obviously loses much in the act of reproduction, the intent here is not to demand the preservation of the authenticity of the lecture for the lecture's sake. We do not mean to idealise or sentimentalise the 'face-to-face' teaching and learning experience. Nor do we mean to claim that lectures are akin to the 'Mona Lisa'. Indeed, that the lecture itself loses authenticity through the act of reproduction is not necessarily a bad thing. The theory behind the usefulness of podcasting as a supplement to the traditional lecture format rests on ideas of learning reinforcement. That is, when a student attends a lecture and afterwards listens to a podcast, the latter is seen to reinforce the learning within the lecture hall. Indeed the fact that a mechanical reproduction 'substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence'<sup>73</sup> can here be seen as a benefit, in that the reproduction has 'reactivate[d] the object reproduced'.<sup>74</sup> In this circumstance, any decision to forfeit access to the original lecture experience is at the discretion of the student. But the circumstances we experienced and that which Lawlor takes issue with are such that the student is increasingly forced to rely upon podcasting as a significant learning interface. This is a pertinent point of equity, since 'it is increasingly recognised that while the majority of incoming university students possess a core set of technology based skills, beyond those a diverse range of skills exist across the student population'.<sup>75</sup> New media technologies can present an ontological confrontation to many, serving to enhance generational and socioeconomic divides. For the authors this is a significant point, given the cultural diversity and high mature-age population of the University of Western Sydney student demographic,<sup>76</sup> which may or may not exhibit those 'Net Generation characteristics' these podcasts are said to cater for.<sup>77</sup> Further, the notion of the 'student cyborg' figured earlier is itself

problematic since, as Kennedy et al. demonstrate, 'we cannot assume that being a member of the "Net Generation" is synonymous with knowing how to employ technology based tools strategically to optimise learning experiences in university settings'.<sup>78</sup>

It is interesting to note that much of the academic literature that proffers support of podcasting in higher education, does so with the understanding that podcasts perform an auxiliary function. For instance, Clark, Taylor and Westcott proceed with the assumption that 'the function of the podcasts was to recapitulate and reinforce key themes discussed in the lecture'; Chan, Lee and McGloughlin insist that 'podcasts should not be thought of as a replacement for classes, but rather as complementary to lectures'; and Williams and Fardon argue that to be effective podcasts should 'be used for on-demand revision purposes rather than replacement purposes'.<sup>79</sup>

However, where the podcast replaces the lecture, the claim to reinforcement is undermined, since the student is lacking that which is being reinforced. When a professor performs her lecture to a mechanical device as if it were an audience in a lecture hall, it is a simulation. The podcast here is the reproduction of an event that never happened, a simulacrum. For the student, too, the podcast has lost its referent. Thus, when accessing a podcast as a replacement for a lecture sets up a falsity in the teaching-student relation.

As Benjamin states, 'the whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility'.<sup>80</sup> Thus, if authenticity is to be promoted, the podcast must be its own original. If podcasting has the ability to realise 'an alternative cultural model of broadcasting'<sup>81</sup> in the university sphere, it should be developed in the university to work to its own strengths, rather than appended as a reproduction or simulation of the lecture. The challenge here, then, becomes how to make this new pedagogical apparatus 'as effective as possible, informed by an awareness of its limitations'<sup>82</sup> *within* a cultural studies context.

#### —CONCLUSION

Unlike the lecture theatre, courtyard, library carrel or even university website (often referred to as the 'virtual university'), the podcast represents the decentralised university *du forte*. At a time where 'academic relations with students have become

increasingly impersonal in the wake of massification',<sup>83</sup> lecture podcasts configure the iPod or mp3 player not only as learning apparatus but also as hyperindividualised sites of pedagogy. Once a lecture is downloaded, the student is literally unplugged from the university, detached even from previous conceptions of the 'virtual campus', since the space provided is not communal, but rather singular and satellite.

Academic staff, too, are sidelined from the teaching experience. Tony Thwaites has argued that if universities want to 'replace rather than extend the classroom' this 'requires a course that can be set up once and then run with a high degree of independence from academic staff'.<sup>84</sup> Leaving aside for a moment the manifold industrial implications here the academic and the student are separated by the mediating force of the podcast and are disengaged from each other, just as the student is disengaged from his peers.

A lot more of the recent literature on pedagogy invokes an understanding of discourse communities for effective teaching and learning, and this seems to be paralleled in the opportunities opened up by convergent and social media. Unfortunately the clunky media of podcasting (or more appropriately, the clunky use of podcasting media) even though it *prima facie* seems to open access and social opportunities—goes backwards to a classic one-way and one-to-many exchange. The popularity of mobile media technologies acts to legitimise their uptake within academic pedagogy. Here, the very mobility of the podcast has increased student engagement with the mechanically reproduced lecture, and the university is beginning to embrace this. But if priority is given to mobility over authenticity, academic value, and above all academic *engagement* with others, this destabilises all pedagogical practice that rests on student-centredness or equal student–teacher contribution. The intervention of popular new media, then, will not necessarily work well, even (perhaps paradoxically) in cultural studies programs, not only because they do not authentically replace the classic pedagogue (who has already been replaced by casual staff), but because they disturb the pedagogical moment by a too individualised engagement that actively disengages, asynchronises and isolates the learner.

This presents a particularly precarious situation when the teachers are themselves already disengaged from, and disengaged by, the university. According

to Alisa Percy et al. casual academics or sessional teachers make a substantial, though under-recognised contribution to teaching in the university system, often as relatively anonymous, disempowered collaborators in the educational process.<sup>85</sup> Casual academics are disempowered by their identity as contingent labour, which disables any attempt to carve a career trajectory or pursue a line of expertise; their transience within the tertiary environment; and their own economic subjectivities. At a moment's notice, they are contracted to courses and 'tacked on' to the teaching staff, and are therefore usually unable to contribute in any sustained way to curricula, governance, or involve themselves in ongoing extra-curricular activity—detaching them to the extent that it makes any more permanent attachment unlikely.

In a sense, the casual academic and the podcast are aligned as the 'hired hands' of academia, appended to the 'real' teaching body in effect 'as representing the person'.<sup>86</sup> But in the teaching contexts we have spoken to in this article the graft or join of the appendage is not integrated or seamless. The process of integration, in contraindication, seems 'off hand', 'out of one's charge or control'.<sup>87</sup> Ideally, the hand should function synecdochally—standing in for the whole—but currently (and increasingly) the podcast and the sessional teacher, it seems, are both theoretically and materially disarticulated from the authorised, centralised teaching body.

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Kieryn McKay is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, where she recently submitted her doctoral thesis on cult literature and music. She is also a co-founder of *Philament: A Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*. Kieryn worked as a casual tutor and guest lecturer in the School of Communication Arts and the School of Humanities and Languages at the University of Western Sydney from 2005 to 2010. Over this same period, she was employed on a series of casual contracts as a research officer in the Centre for Cultural Research, also at the University of Western Sydney. Though the longest of these contracts extended to only six months, she worked at the centre continuously for six years.

Kylie Brass worked as a research officer and casual tutor at the University of Western Sydney at the time of writing this paper. Her current position is as Policy and Projects Manager at the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

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—NOTES

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- <sup>18</sup> M. Lee, 'New Tools for Online Collaboration: Blogs, Wikis, RSS and Podcasting', *Training and Development in Australia*, 17–20 October, 2005, p. 19.
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*Revolution: Why We Need to Reconceptualise Australia's Future Academic Workforce, and Eight Possible Strategies for How to Go About This*, LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management, Melbourne, 2010, p. 15).

<sup>33</sup> Coates and Goedegebuure, p. 16.

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<sup>43</sup> Barrett, p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> Junor, p. 280.

<sup>45</sup> Junor, p. 277.

<sup>46</sup> Ross, p. 12.

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<sup>48</sup> Junor, p. 302.

<sup>49</sup> A. Lazarsfeld Jensen and K. Morgan, *Overload: The Role of Work-Volume Escalation and Micro-Management of Academic Work Patterns in Loss of Morale and Collegiality at UWS; The Way Forward*, NTEU, Melbourne, 2009, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> Junor, p. 280.

<sup>51</sup> Junor, p. 302.

- <sup>52</sup> R. May, I. Campbell and J. Burgess, “The Rise and Rise of Casual Work in Australia: Who Benefits, Who Loses?”, paper presented at IR Changes Report Card forum, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney, 20 June 2005 <<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Women/Risefall.pdf>>, p. 7.
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- <sup>54</sup> Churchman, p. 10.
- <sup>55</sup> Barrett, p. 99.
- <sup>56</sup> Churchman, p. 10.
- <sup>57</sup> Churchman, p. 10.
- <sup>58</sup> Junor, p. 302.
- <sup>59</sup> Churchman, p. 2.
- <sup>60</sup> Gregg, p. 470.
- <sup>61</sup> May, Campbell and Burgess, p. 7.
- <sup>62</sup> Kwok.
- <sup>63</sup> Thwaites, p. 480.
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- <sup>67</sup> Benjamin, p. 214.
- <sup>68</sup> Benjamin, p. 215.
- <sup>69</sup> Benjamin, p. 215.
- <sup>70</sup> Benjamin, p. 215.
- <sup>71</sup> Benjamin, p. 214.
- <sup>72</sup> Benjamin, p. 214.
- <sup>73</sup> Benjamin, p. 215.
- <sup>74</sup> Benjamin, p. 215.
- <sup>75</sup> G. E. Kennedy, T. S. Judd, A. Churchward, K. Gray and K-L. Krause, ‘First Year Students’ Experiences with Technology: Are They Really Digital Natives?’, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2008, p. 117.
- <sup>76</sup> The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has what it terms ‘a uniquely remedial profile’. It attracts large cohorts of low Universities Admission Index (UAI), low socioeconomic status (SES) students. A 2006 Australian Universities Quality Agency survey reported ‘52 per cent of UWS students are the first member of their family to attend university, many enter from TAFE, and entry scores “are among the lowest in the NSW metropolitan area”’. The 2005 cohort ‘included students born in more than 170 countries and ... international students from more than 100 countries’. A 2006 study also showed that UWS is 26.43 per cent higher than the state average and 70.91 per cent higher than national average in

NESB students. The UWS also accommodates a significantly higher portion of students with disabilities, scoring 16.26 per cent higher than the state average. (For a full breakdown of these demographics, see Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan, pp. 26–7.)

<sup>77</sup> Williams and Fardon, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Kennedy et al., p. 118.

<sup>79</sup> Clark, Taylor and Westcott, p. 25; Chan, Lee and McGloughlin, p. 118; Williams and Fardon, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, p. 214.

<sup>81</sup> Sterne et al.

<sup>82</sup> Williams and Fardon, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> B. Macfarlane, 'The Disengaged Academic: The Retreat From Citizenship', *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 4, October 2005, p. 309.

<sup>84</sup> Thwaites, p. 480.

<sup>85</sup> Percy et al.

<sup>86</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>87</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.