

# Taking Credit for Stupidity

## On Being a Student in the Performative University

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# **Taking credit for stupidity: On being a student in the performative university**

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## **Abstract**

Stupidity is generally thought of as a hindrance to learning: an epistemic vice that stands in the way of knowledge and understanding. In this article, I challenge this idea by exploring some of the meanings of stupidity that place it in a positive relation to learning. In this light, the article discusses two notions of stupidity: stupidity as unfinished thought and stupefaction through study. I show how these forms of stupidity, rather than indicating a lack of learning, can be considered as a crucial part of the learning process. These types of desirable stupidity have come under increasing threat in academic cultures that are dominated by performance criteria. On the basis of this analysis, the article argues for the importance of academic practices that make room for these positive forms of stupidity and thereby facilitate what it means to be a student.

## **Introduction**

Like all other academics, scholars working in management studies are prone to complaining about the ‘stupidity’ of their bosses, colleagues, and students, of the research carried out in their field, the research subjects they are obliged to work with, the assessment exercises imposed on their departments, the limited resources available to them, and many other similarly ‘stupid’ things (e.g. Piercy, 2000). Yet stupidity is rarely discussed in management research, either in the context of the academy or that of the workplace more broadly (rare exceptions include Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Ten Bos, 2007). This is perhaps not terribly surprising: talk about

stupidity primarily expresses a subjective relationship with the ‘stupid’ object or subject, a relationship in which the speaker violently denounces the target of his or her speech (Ronell, 2002). Given that ‘stupid’ is one of many words we use to designate that which we would be better off without, the assumption that stupidity has no positive role to play in academia may seem obvious. But when we look more closely at the meanings of ‘stupidity’, softening or setting aside the performative force of the term, we see that stupidity is in fact an indispensable part of learning and study.

In contrast to studies that focus on collective forms of organizational stupidity, which dominate the scarce organizational literature on the topic (e.g. Ahmadzadeh, Safari and Teimouri, 2022; Azevedo, 2022), my goal here is to explore the notion of stupidity from a learning perspective in the context of the contemporary business school. My focus is on ‘student learning’ in the broadest senses of the terms ‘student’ (one who studies) and ‘learning’ (what happens to us when we study). My interest thus extends beyond undergraduate and masters students to take in doctoral students, lecturers, and full professors. Student learning, on this broad construal, is the foundational activity of the academy, encompassing the outcomes of both the teaching and research functions of the modern university. All other objectives of these institutions, should, in theory, be subordinated to this central end. Nevertheless, remaining a student throughout one’s academic career may be the most difficult challenge faced by professional scholars. As I suggest in this paper, this has everything to do with the far-reaching changes imposed on the academic landscape in recent decades, which have seen the university become a highly performative institution (Jones et al., 2020).

I fully realize that exploring the value of stupidity for student learning is a counterintuitive exercise. In the few published studies of stupidity in the context of student learning, stupidity appears as something to be avoided or overcome (e.g. Best, 2011; Pelánek and Effenberger, 2022). Similarly, in the scarce philosophical literature on the topic, stupidity is seen as an ‘epistemic vice’ (Engel, 2016; Cassam, 2019), which is to say that stupidity, whatever it may be, is generally treated as a hindrance to thought, not something with any merit or virtue for learning, and certainly not something to be actively fostered. Even in the recent literature on collective forms of stupidity in organizations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; 2016; Graeber, 2015), which does – reluctantly and somewhat ironically – attribute positive values to stupidity, the ‘positives’ only exist for the organization and those who benefit from its activities, not for the employee who has to carry out ‘stupid’ tasks. This paper goes beyond such approaches to the positive dimensions of stupidity by showing that the individual learner also has something to gain from environments in which stupid thoughts can be openly shared and explored. Whereas the performative force of calling something or someone ‘stupid’ is detrimental for learning, stupidity itself, on my account, has positive roles to play in the learning process. What those roles are will emerge from an exploration of the various meanings of ‘stupidity’.

In considering what ‘stupidity’ might mean in various contexts, this paper follows a conceptual trajectory that progressively connects and integrates stupidity with thought. The dominant theme in the organizational literature is stupidity as the absence of thought. This view suggests that negative stupidity manifests itself most prominently as thoughtlessness, and that it is particularly visible from an

organizational perspective when people follow rules or traditions without thinking about the broader context.

After some elaboration of the concept of stupidity, which shows that the meanings of stupidity are not confined to an absence of thought, I then go on to explore two alternative understandings that I consider to be under threat in the performative university. The first is the idea of stupidity as undeveloped thought: a stupid thought is one that, according to the person who qualifies it as ‘stupid’, is unfinished or superfluous – something spoken too quickly. This conception of stupidity identifies the stupid thought as an unavoidable, almost essential, preliminary phase for achieving less stupid outcomes. The second sense of stupidity I consider is stupefaction through study – the experience of not feeling capable of processing what one has learned by studying. This is, I argue, a clear sign that the stupefied person is operating on the border of their intelligibility, and that they are thus fully testing their intellectual capacities.

I go on to argue that the performance culture, which increasingly pervades contemporary universities in most countries (Jones et al., 2020, see also Ball, 2012), makes it more difficult for these two forms of stupidity to manifest themselves in a beneficial manner. Even places that are traditionally supposed to be safeguarded from the pressure to perform, such as the departmental seminar or the doctoral course, can quickly become environments in which one is afraid to appear as stupid and is, thus, less inclined to share one’s thoughts openly. The paper concludes by drawing

attention to the merits of such places and calling for more attention to be paid to their protection.

### **Stupidity in organizations as a lack of thought**

As Azevedo (2022) notes, while stupidity is still rarely discussed in management and organization studies, over the last decade there has been a notable rise in interest in the topic, particularly in the context of the relationship between organizational stupidity and affiliated concepts such as bullshit (Christensen, Kärreman and Rasche, 2019; Spicer, 2017), ignorance (Bakken and Wiik, 2018; Roberts, 2013; 2018; Schaefer, 2019), foolishness (Larsen, 2020), nonsense (Azevedo, 2020) and absurdity (Loacker and Peters, 2015; Starkey, Tempest and Cinque, 2019).

The focal point in these studies is the collective forms of stupidity that manifest themselves in organizations (e.g. Azevedo, 2022; Love et al., 2018). In particular, the notion of functional stupidity, first proposed by Alvesson and Spicer (2012; 2016), has gained considerable traction (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Karimi-Ghartemani, Khani and Isfahani, 2022; Love et al., 2018; Paulsen, 2017). In most of these studies, functional or collective stupidity is portrayed in a negative light, as something that must be overcome, for instance, to improve organizational decision-making (Ahmadzadeh, Safari and Teimouri, 2022) or to facilitate organizational learning (Karimi-Ghartemani, Khani and Isfahani, 2022). Alvesson and Spicer, however, paint a more complex picture. In contrast to what the managerial discourse of ‘knowledge’ and ‘smartness’ suggests, they argue that stupidity can also be beneficial for organizations, in the sense that by fostering stupidity the organization reduces employee agency and defends itself against the emergence of possible critiques from

within the workforce. However, while stupidity can, on this analysis be understood as ‘functional’ in a positive sense, they continue to warn against ‘excessive’ forms of functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; see also Butler, 2016 for a critique).

The main assumption in the organizational literature on stupidity is that stupidity amounts to a lack of thought. For instance, Alvesson and Spicer define functional stupidity as an ‘inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1201) or, elsewhere, as ‘the inclination to reduce one’s scope of thinking, and focus only on the narrow, technical aspects of the job’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016: 8-9). On this kind of account, the adversary to stupidity is *thinking*, understood in terms of its three main manifestations: reflection, reflexivity, and reasoning.

What is important for Alvesson and Spicer is the question of how employees become functionally stupid. Here, they play with the double meaning of ‘function’: their notion of functional stupidity both suggests that stupidity is functional (i.e. beneficial) for organizations, and that organizational functions (i.e. organizational roles) are largely responsible for this stupidity. Functional stupidity is therefore associated with an individual blindly following the expectations and technical demands of the job that has been given to them. It is the term that Alvesson and Spicer use for what Arendt (1964) famously referred to in her report on Eichmann as ‘thoughtlessness’. For Alvesson and Spicer, thoughtlessness is not merely a feature of modern bureaucracy. Rather, it extends to organizations that are routinely qualified as ‘smart’ or ‘knowledge-intensive’ and is especially prevalent in highly digitalized organizations (Stiegler, 2016). The performative university is a case in point. Indeed, Alvesson and

Spicer specify the contemporary university as a site in which there are ‘too many kinds of [functional] stupidity to mention’, including ‘the thoughtless pursuit of rankings’ and ‘ritualistic box-ticking’ (2016: x).

The examples of functional stupidity that Alvesson and Spicer note in the context of the university are clearly not desirable, at least not from their perspective, and one might conclude that stupidity has no positive role to play in academia (Footnote 1). However, when I argue for the importance of certain forms of stupidity in research and teaching, I do not have forms of thoughtless compliance in mind. Instead, I arrive at two rather different notions of stupidity by questioning the main assumption underlying organizational studies of collective stupidity, namely the idea that stupidity should essentially be understood as a lack of thought. For Alvesson and Spicer, and others writing on functional or collective stupidity, mindless obedience to one’s role or to existing rules is the hallmark of stupidity. But we may ask if it is indeed true, as Paulsen (2017: 205) radically puts it, that ‘stupidity strictly belongs to the sphere of compliance’.

The answer, I suggest, is no. Stupidity should not be understood against the background of compliance or obedience, even if the language of stupidity may occasionally point in that direction. As we will see, some dominant connotations of stupidity point rather towards a certain ignorance of rules and laws, whether formal or social in nature. For instance, ‘it was stupid to raise my voice in that situation’ would be a typical reflection on an instance in which the speaker did not understand the situation in which they found themselves. In this case, the speaker failed to recognize the rules of that situation, and therefore appeared stupid. The literature on functional



and collective stupidity in organizations does not, then, capture the rich range of senses in which we might call something ‘stupid’. Before introducing two distinct notions of stupidity that are useful in the context of student learning, it will be useful to reflect on the broad range of meanings associated with the language of ‘stupidity’.

### **The meanings of stupidity**

The term ‘stupid’ belongs to a relatively small group of words – including ‘idiot’, ‘dumb’, and ‘bullshit’ – the meanings of which are difficult to make out because of the performative effect of these words. To describe something as ‘stupid’ is never simply a matter of reference; it is unavoidably also an act of denunciation. Talk about stupidity has a strongly performative dimension, and this dimension is impossible to set aside fully in day-to-day speech (although we may still make the attempt in an academic context). To call something ‘stupid’ is a performative act that seeks to cause injury to the stupid ‘other’; to name the stupid is to separate the normal from the abnormal, the worthy from the unworthy (Ronell, 2002).

The performative effect of the term appears to be so strong that it becomes difficult to use the word meaningfully in writing or conversation. This is not because the term ‘stupid’ has become meaningless but, rather, because its meaning is subordinated to the insult to such an extent that it is hard to make out what exactly one says about the target in calling someone or something ‘stupid’. Established meanings of ‘stupidity’ survive in our use of the term, but to make out what these meanings are we have to listen carefully and try to shut our ears to the insult that unavoidably comes with the word.

The performative force of the word ‘stupid’, which dominates our use of the term today, is of relatively recent date. A century ago, it was still acceptable to speak of ‘the stupid’ in academic publications, especially in psychology when referring to people with low intelligence (see, for example, Terman, 1906). In management theory, Fredrick Taylor (1911: 59) infamously explained that a man fit ‘to handle pig iron as a regular occupation’ must be ‘so stupid and phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type’. Such texts seem insulting today (and we may have good arguments for claiming that such texts *are* insulting, sexist, racist, etc.), but the use of the term ‘stupid’ was not consciously meant to cause injury. It was mostly intended as a description, without being freighted with the insulting quality that dictates today’s usage. To call someone ‘stupid’ was to label them as having a limited cognitive capacity without also condemning them for their lack of ability. Today, such use is no longer possible, as it would be taken as an *active* attempt to devalue certain groups or to exclude them from society.

When we inquire more deeply into what stupidity *means*, in contrast to what talk about stupidity *does*, we are quickly struck by the complexity of the term. One dimension of this complexity is the relation of ‘stupidity’ to what is often taken to be its antonym, smartness. When we say to ourselves, ‘that was stupid of me’, we often refer to actions or their lack which, in retrospect, were based on a failure to think about something upon which we should have reflected. We may be telling ourselves that we ought to have thought more clearly, and, in principle, that we had the capacity to do so but failed to use it. Smart people, in this sense, are by no means immune to stupidity; they are stupid from time to time relative to their own capacities (Engel, 2016). The distinction here is between thinking deeply on the one hand, and

superficial thinking or thoughtlessness on the other: it is smart to think carefully and it is stupid to think without due care. To put it another way, not thinking carefully leads to stupid thoughts and actions.

In line with this dominant association of stupidity with a lack of sound thinking, stupidity is sometimes associated with a blind obedience to rules, where rules, especially in a bureaucratic environment, act as a substitute for critical thought (Graeber, 2015). As we have seen, this is the dominant connotation of stupidity in the literature on organizational stupidity. But it is worth noting that even when stupidity is reduced to thoughtlessness, it does not need to stem from compliance. We might also characterize our thinking as ‘stupid’, for instance, if we overlook something that should have been obvious. Ronell (2002) even arrives at a conclusion that is the exact opposite to the views of those who have connected stupidity to thoughtlessness as a consequence of blindly following rules, roles or functions. She concludes that stupidity ‘knows no law ... it is indifferent to difference and blind to hierarchy’ (2002: 43). Stupidity, on this account, is opposed to dogmatism: if dogmatism is the following of the law, then stupidity is about ‘ignoring’ or ‘neglecting’ it (ibid.). Construed in this way, stupidity stands in diametrical opposition to compliance (which assumes the recognition of limits, rules or orders that are obeyed). In line with this idea of stupidity as a deviation or rules or norms, we might call a person ‘stupid’ when they do not behave in a way that accords with established norms of social behavior. While this kind of ‘unacceptable’ behavior can certainly be framed in negative terms (someone is *being* stupid), this kind of departure from social norms also gives rise to a rare positive use of the term. ‘Let’s do something stupid!’ is a call

to action that indicates a willful temporary departure from what is considered normal or acceptable.

We may further question whether the meanings stupidity can be reduced to a lack of thought to begin with. After all, in most of the examples mentioned so far, stupidity manifests itself *in* thoughts. Understanding the nature of stupidity is therefore also a matter of understanding thinking itself, rather than meditating on its absence.

The idea that stupidity is an essential part of thought itself, and that it cannot be equated with thoughtlessness, can be found in a small literature in philosophy on epistemological vices (Cassam, 2019; Tanesini, 2018). In de Beistegui's recent book *Thought under Threat* (2022: 30), for instance, stupidity is 'the state [of thought] in which we find ourselves naturally, our default position as it were, and one into which we constantly risk relapsing'. Stupidity, in short, 'attacks thought in its ability to *learn*' (2022: 32; emphasis in original) and it can never be pushed to the outside of our thinking. Stupidity, then, for de Beistegui, is an enemy within that requires constant attention and demands constant intellectual struggle.

If we look back to the etymological origins of the term, we find that stupidity literally means to be 'struck senseless' (from the Latin verb *stupere*, *stupe-* = hit), with the connotation that one is unable to express oneself properly after having been hit by something. Despite the fact that many of the term's contemporary connotations do not flow directly from its etymological roots, this original meaning still colors our understanding of the language of stupidity in Germanic and Romance languages alike. In the Germanic languages, to be stupid is, etymologically, in some sense to be silent.

The German *stummfilm* or the Dutch *stomme film*, literally ‘stupid movie’, mean ‘silent movie’. Stupidity is also cognate with ‘to stammer’ and ‘to stumble’, indicating a struggle to speak. The Dutch ‘met stomheid geslagen’, literally means ‘to be hit by stupidity’, conveying the sense of being ‘thoroughly confused’. The English ‘to be stupefied’ also has this meaning: one is affected to the point that one is at a loss for words. ‘Stupid’ is also cognate with the English ‘stub’, the German ‘stumpf’, and the Dutch ‘stomp’, which all mean ‘not sharp’, or ‘blunt’, possibly as a consequence of deterioration over time, or due to an event or accident. These words point towards the fact that things may be called ‘stupid’ if they do not assume the form that they are supposed to have. We can find similar connections in the Romance languages, where the connotations of the Latin root persist to varying degrees.

The word ‘stupid’ has the same root meaning as ‘dumb’, both indicating an incapacity when it comes to speech. Yet much can be made of the difference. The German expression *Besser stum als dumm*, ‘better to be stupid than dumb’, for instance, hints at the possibility of there being a certain smartness in keeping silent. It suggests that, in some situations at least, it is better not to express one’s thoughts, an approach that requires a cunning mind, perhaps even a strategic intelligence. While it may be possible to consider this to be a form of ‘playing stupid’, rather than ‘real’ stupidity, it nudges us towards the realization that smartness and stupidity are not simply opposed but stand in a much more complex relationship with each other.

I will now turn to consider what follows from two assumptions: 1) that stupidity cannot be reduced to a lack of thought as it is itself a manifestation of thought; and 2) that stupidity cannot be understood against the horizon of obedience but must rather

be conceived of as a form of thought with non-dogmatic qualities. These two assumptions open up different views on stupidity, which I will explore in relation to student learning.

### **Stupidity as undeveloped thought**

As we have already observed, being called stupid may indicate nothing more than that the target is being dismissed by someone. However, if *a thought* is dismissed as stupid by an audience, the underlying reason is often related to the etymological connection between ‘stupid’ and ‘stub’ (as well as the German ‘stumpf’ and Dutch ‘stomp’): a stupid thought is not sharp, it is like a blunt knife, not ‘to the point’. A blunt knife does not do what it is supposed to do: it does not cut. Similarly, a stupid thought fails in thinking something clearly. A stupid thought is a thought that (according to the one who makes the call) does not deserve to be put at rest yet in publication (i.e. in becoming public). It requires more work, like a knife that needs sharpening. It stands in contrast to an incisive thought, or a sharp thought.

This etymological link reminds us that the identification of a thought as stupid does not always need to be a stopping point, even though calling something ‘stupid’ is typically an attempt to shut it down. Rather than being set aside, at least some stupid thoughts deserve to be developed to the point that we do not deem them to be stupid anymore.

We may go even further and say that for something to be ‘developed’ it must have been ‘undeveloped’ at some point. This promotes stupidity to the status of an essential part of any thinking process: we must have stupid thoughts if we are to move forward

to something smarter. A chess player, for instance, will typically consider a number of weaker moves before settling on what they believe to be the strongest move. They won't be embarrassed by their consideration of 'stupid' moves they did not play, and, indeed, reflection on these moves is usually necessary to find the move upon which they ultimately settle. Stupidity is, in short, indispensable for learning. It is only when a poor move becomes public, i.e. when it is played, that a player may be embarrassed by the 'blunder' (a word that, again, connotes the loss of a sensory faculty: from the Old Norse *blundra*, 'to shut one's eyes').

If we draw out the chess analogy a little further, we might ask whether stupidity ought to be hidden from all audiences, as it is (ideally) in competitive play. Any chess player knows that this is not actually desirable. In fact, it is highly beneficial to let others (a trainer, other students) in on one's stupid thoughts, as going through them together offers an important path to improvement. It would, we might say, be stupid not to share one's stupid thoughts, for 'keeping shtum' necessarily creates a powerful barrier to progress. This is, of course, true for any other form of learning.

What happens in a performance culture, by contrast, is that the kind of pressure that directs behaviour in match play in chess gets transferred to spaces that should ideally be devoid of such pressure. For instance, it has, unfortunately, become quite common in academic departmental seminars to present papers that have already been published, and ideally in highly ranked journal, to showcase one's 'excellence'. This does little for the learning of the presenter, who positions him or herself as a performer and authority rather than as a student, or that of the listener, who is implicitly asked to respond to the paper as a stamped, sealed and certified 'finished'

work of scholarship. From a learning perspective, it makes far more sense to present work that is rough, or ‘blunt’, and to let others in on the sharpening process.

### **Stupidity and study**

Taking as our starting point the view that stupidity is the absence of thought, we moved on to consider stupidity as an essential part of thinking, even though it is a part of thinking that must constantly be overcome. In this section, we turn full circle in considering how stupidity can also be a worthwhile achievement in its own right – not as something to overcome *through* thought but something to strive for *in* thought.

In making this argument, the etymological sense of stupidity as being ‘struck senseless’, i.e. being hit by something in such a way that one becomes stupefied, is of particular interest. In this context, Agamben identifies a surprising etymological link between stupidity and study:

[the word *studium*] goes back to a st- or sp- root indicating a crash, the shock of impact. Studying and stupefying are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold. (Agamben, 1995: 64)

One may very reasonably ask whether Agamben is making too much of this etymological connection between study and stupidity, given the different meanings of the Latin verbs ‘stupeo’ (to hit, to be struck by) and ‘studeo’ (to be devoted, to study). As one of the reviewers of this paper helpfully pointed out, the common root of these



words in the verb 'tundo' (to hammer, to strike) is a rather slight etymological basis for linking stupidity to study. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why Agamben's surprising link is worth reflecting upon, at the conceptual, if not the linguistic, level.

Most fundamentally, Agamben's link rhymes well with some principal experiences involved in study. For instance, reading books that we find difficult to process do frequently make us feel stupid in the sense that they confront us (or 'hit us') with the realization that we are operating at the limits of our understanding. Studying can lead us into a state in which we are outside our habitual ways of thinking, to the extent that we may feel that we have gone beyond our intellectual capacity, leaving us disoriented and confused. The feeling that 'there is something there' that one cannot fully grasp or take control over, or the feeling that one is 'on to something' without being capable of expressing what that something might be, or the feeling that one is adrift in an uncontrollable sea of ideas, are experiences that can be associated with this state. Clearly, this is not a state of mind that one should seek to avoid. Pushing against the limits of one's understanding, over and over again, goes to the heart of what it is to be a student. It ought to be a recurrent state, shared by bachelors' students and full professors alike.

This link between stupidity and study also reminds us that student learning cannot ever be fully subordinated to ends. The idea of stupidity as undeveloped thought suggests that stupidity is best left behind, that is it merely a transitory stage on the way to knowledge. By contrast, stupefaction through study, as a fragile state to which we aspire rather than try to overcome, serves to remind us that output ought not to be the director of study. Stupidity is not merely something to be overcome in the search

for theoretical explanations, or something to be settled in the form of a publishable paper. Rather than seeing the stupidity that emerges through study as a means to an end, one can also see it as going to the heart of what it means to be a student.

Following this line of thought, being a student means that one constantly exposes oneself to thoughts that one does not master, that is to say one willingly engages in the Sisyphean task of keeping oneself stupid.

In a performance culture, this kind of studying is pushed into the wings as the production of outputs takes centre stage. Performance cultures invite thinking in terms of outcomes that can be measured, compared, and managed – whether in the form of publications ‘that count’ or in terms of measurable ‘learning outcomes’. The process of doing research is still important in such an environment, of course, but only to the extent that it ‘ends’ in publication. Yet learning is not exhausted by its results. It keeps itself alive by allowing itself to drift in directions that do not serve a pre-established end (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018).

I once heard a well-known management professor say that the best decision he had ever made was to stop reading (philosophy, in particular). Perhaps this was meant in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but the sentiment points toward an increasingly common view that favours output-oriented working practices over the inefficiencies of studying. As a result, what gets written, especially by more senior and successful scholars, becomes increasingly safe, almost mechanical, leading to publications that are tightly referenced and professionally crafted ‘contributions’, but which do little to challenge the thinking of either the author or audience. In relation to such texts, it is difficult to be a student.

### **Finding a place for stupidity**

While this paper was being written, the University of Leicester decided to make redundant most of its management scholars with a profile in critical management studies and political economy. This was, of course, in many ways a stupid thing to do. As numerous commentators have pointed out on social media and elsewhere, this decision effectively turned an outstanding management school with a social and critical profile into a mediocre business school with no specific profile at all (see Parker, 2021). Ironically, at the same time as management were settling on this course of action, students were increasingly demanding a broader perspective on businesses and organizations than is offered by the kind of managerial mindset prevalent in the type of business school that the University of Leicester evidently aspires to nurture.

I have a personal relation to these events at Leicester. Not only are many of those who have been made redundant former colleagues of mine, but I was also, for many years, and especially as a doctoral student, an active member of the Leicester-based Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy, affiliation with which has been used to target staff for redundancy. This centre was first and foremost a space for group reading and discussions that often focused on classic texts in sociology and philosophy, activities that are far from exceptional in many academic environments but are relatively rare in business schools. What I remember particularly well about my participation in these reading groups over the years is that they provided a setting in which I rarely worried that I might appear stupid. I was confident that nobody would mind if I shared my personal reading of the texts under discussion, no matter how questionable, poorly informed, or just plain un insightful they might be. To me, this open and non-

judgemental environment served as a liberating example of the kind of space for stupidity that ought to be central in academia.

The Leicester case is an extreme example of a broader trend that values ends over processes, thereby prioritizing a narrow management logic over open-ended learning. As Harney and Moten (2013) argue, the contemporary university is centered around the idea of gaining credit, which we can understand as economic, institutional, or societal currency. The student acquires credit by earning a degree, the teacher through student evaluations, the researcher through journal publications, and the institution through various forms of accreditation. Harney and Moten further suggest that all of these forms of credit are fundamentally at odds with study, understood as an exploration of ideas that is unconstrained by predefined goals. If there is still a place for study in the university, they provocatively say, then this place is ‘criminal’ in relation to the dominant logic of accreditation (Moten and Harney, 2004). Study does happen, but it occurs in a place that they call the ‘undercommons’ of the university. We can think here of reading groups, like those organized by the CPPE, that meet in the metaphorical basement of the university, sometimes indeed actively discouraged because they fall outside, and therefore corrupt, the smooth economy of credit to which the market-oriented university aspires.

What Harney and Moten signal is connected to the performance culture in research and teaching that characterizes the market-oriented university. This culture jeopardizes learning when it instills a fear of appearing stupid into students and staff, a fear that is the result of a constant pressure to ‘perform’ in accordance with specified and measurable criteria (Empson, 2020). Meanwhile, the increasing

tendency to identify research quality with the journal in which an article was published, for instance, has led to a university culture of game-playing academics (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020) who are infatuated with ‘journal-list fetishism’ (Willmott, 2011). In this performance culture, research becomes more predictable and formulaic as it models itself on the kind of research that typically gets published (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). In teaching, some studies suggest that the increasing focus on ‘learning outcomes’, itself part of a managerial trend (Hussey and Smith, 2002), can be detrimental to student learning as it seeks to straitjacket learning into predictable, measurable, and manageable outcomes (Erikson and Erikson, 2018).

Thankfully, this bleak picture of the halls of higher learning does not hold for all university environments, even if the general trend is hardly encouraging. Even from the perspective of a credit-based economy, study is far more beneficial than some university administrators appear to believe: many business school students, in my experience at least, have a genuine interest in study. It is, of course, easy for them to slide into the role of consumer, but this role is hardly created by the students themselves; it is, rather, the outcome of a managerial agenda that has been imposed on higher education (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2018). We may further note that papers published in the cherished ‘top journals’ are likely to be much impoverished if they do not emerge as by-products of a genuinely studious environment. Indeed, there are few academics who feel genuinely at home playing the journal publication game, even when they fully participate in it (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). But the logic of credit becomes increasingly dominant as one climbs the stairs of the university, and by the time one reaches the boardroom, it is often the case that accreditation has become fully detached from study.

With Harney and Moten, I understand study, and more broadly student learning in teaching and research, as something that is not subordinated to a creditable end. But rather than returning to the old idea of research pursued for its own ends, we should, with Agamben (2000), conceive of study as a ‘means without end’, that is, as an activity that is neither directed towards an end nor based on a solid foundation, and that is therefore bound to a wandering that never ‘arrives’ (at a creditable outcome, for instance). Hence, even when credit is given and gained, which, of course, is both inevitable and often also desirable, it does not mark a stopping point for learning.

Measures can be taken to safeguard or create such spaces. Some academic journals, for instance, have created ‘special sections’ that are open for more adventurous, or at least less formulaic, research– the present journal included (Spoelstra, 2017).

Similarly, in terms of teaching, one can, for instance, decide to offer feedback on works-in-progress rather than on the final exam that is to be graded (and which is unlikely to be revisited again by the student). Or let us take the straightforward example of a doctoral course in the tradition of the humanities as they exist in places with a strong focus on the doctoral curriculum, such as the US and continental Europe. In my experience, such doctoral courses are often the most rewarding for both students and staff precisely because students are not expected to already be in the know, and nor are the teachers who feel comfortable addressing questions that do not lend themselves to easy answers. The mutual admission that none of the participants already possess the answers to the question under consideration is often given in advance, a recognition that, ideally, fosters an open conversation without the fear of being called out as ‘stupid’. The whole point of such a course, one might say, is to

create a space in which one feels encouraged to try out one's unformed and stupid thoughts on one another, so that all might benefit.

Of course, I realize that this is an idealized picture that is never fully realized in the classroom. Doctoral students, especially when they are new to a topic, may still be fearful about sharing their unformed thoughts, and teachers may feel the pressure to perform as if they are an expert who already knows whatever there is to know. Either party may also have personal reasons for engaging in the course primarily for its extrinsic rewards. But the essential point is that doctoral courses, if they are to be rewarding for students and teachers, usually do provide a space in which one can be stupid, that is, in which one can articulate undeveloped thoughts and become confused as a consequence of study.

Given the trend for increasingly managerial approaches to the running of academic institutions, we cannot expect institutions to be too proactive when it comes to safeguarding spaces for stupidity. Unfortunately, there are few signs that this will change in the foreseeable future. But academics can try to create those spaces for one another. They have, of course, always done so, and will continue to do so in spite of the performative university.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have proposed two notions of stupidity that are positive, and even essential, for student learning: stupidity as undeveloped thought and stupidity as the stupefaction that comes about through study that challenges the limits of a person's understanding. Central to this effort has been the attempt to mute the performative

force normally associated with the language of stupidity, i.e. its capacity to cause injury to its target. When we distinguish between the performative force of stupidity – which is realized when we call something ‘stupid’ – and the various meanings of the word, our attention is drawn to environments or spaces in which stupidity exists, but in which it is never called out.

The organizational literature has largely missed these understandings of stupidity because it understands stupidity against the horizon of thoughtless compliance. Of course, such a limited understanding of stupidity does offer insights. The notion of functional stupidity, in particular, does successfully highlight certain problems in the performative university, including the tendency of research to become more and more formulaic. However, a narrow focus on stupidity as thoughtless compliance obscures the positive value of stupidity for not just diagnosing but also overcoming the perils of performativity in higher education. Allowing for stupidity offers ways to move beyond the boundaries imposed on our thoughts by ourselves and the institutions to which we belong.

## **Footnotes**

(1) It is worth mentioning that Thomas Kuhn (1963) did, in fact, come close to advocating for a form of ‘functional stupidity’ in science when he insisted that what he called ‘Normal science’ benefits from a certain ‘dogmatism’, or ‘a deep commitment to a particular way of viewing the world and of practicing science in it’ (Kuhn, 1963: 349). This is, of course, also a view with advocates in management science (e.g. Pfeffer, 1993). For Paul Feyerabend, a strong critic of Kuhn, the



dogmatism of the professional scientist that Kuhn defended indeed amounts to a defense of ‘professional stupidity’ (Feyerabend, 1970: 208).

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