

# ***Becoming jelly: A call for gelatinous pedagogy within higher education***

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## **Abstract**

This paper calls for a debate concerning the dominant tropes, which we have assigned the power to define learning processes in higher education today. The argument of the paper takes a critical stand towards the tropes of taxonomy-based and Bildung-oriented understandings of learning processes and student voice in higher education. We argue that learning processes are more than mere phenomena of linear progression capable of being measured based on pre-set criteria for learning outcomes. On the other hand, we do not argue, that it is productive to take the easy way out using an abstract and shadowy vocabulary of Bildung, authenticity and personal growth. Instead we call for a new vocabulary in educational theory, which is capable of addressing the half-formed, premature and idiosyncratic dimensions of learning processes present in the everyday life of higher education. Inspired by the jelly as a metaphor, and drawing on thinkers such as Richard Sennett, Graham Harman and Friedrich Nietzsche, we call for a gelatinous pedagogy, which, in thought and language, match the motley-coloured, mongrel and queer developmental processes and strategies applied by students and teachers in higher education practice. By developing and applying the jelly as a new metaphor for learning processes and student voice in higher education we are able to address critical issues otherwise overlooked. Out of this application three findings and one suggestion for further research emerge: Firstly, vocabularies for understanding learning processes must have the ambition of making visible those queer processes. This must be done in a language and using a vocabulary, which has gelatinous qualities enabling the capability to grasp specific learning experiences in situ. Secondly, such a language should embrace the tentative, uncertain and troublesome character of learning processes – hereby acknowledging that such processes might never reach an end point and therefore not necessarily lead anywhere. Thirdly, an understanding of learning processes, therefore, cannot be adequately understood as a fixed structure or linear layout, but must rather be approached as jelly-like structures of entanglement and swarm. Fourthly, and finally, the challenge for understanding networked learning within higher education in a more nuanced way can be met by developing a gelatinous pedagogy; a pedagogy linguistically and conceptually sensitive to the multifarious dimensions of learning and being whether these be skills, forms of identity, or sheer ambivalence and obscurity in thought.

## **Keywords**

Educational philosophy. Creativity. Gelatinous pedagogy. Higher education. Professional development. Networked learning.



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## Why we need gelatinous pedagogy and a jelly-like vocabulary

A dominant discourse in higher education policy and research articulates the need for a more “visible” curriculum and more visible learning and teaching strategies (Hattie 2011). In this discourse we find a tendency to linear understandings of learning processes which can be made explicit and articulated in alignment-strategies and learning taxonomies (Biggs & Tang 2007; Ramsden 2008; Dee Fink 2013). This understanding of learning processes focus on coherent logical progression, consistency and criteria-based options for assessment and evaluation of student competences and learning outcomes.

This discourse has been, for some time now, objected to as a phenomenon of “managerialism” and “accountability” within higher education by educational philosophers such as Ronald Barnett (2013; 2011), Denise Batchelor (2008; 2006), Gert Biesta (2006) and Ray Land (2004). In this context, and in the paper as a whole the term “education” is not used to denote the institutional and organizational dimensions of higher education, but more existential and pedagogical dimensions. In a similar way Danish educational philosophers such as Finn Torbjørn Hansen (2010) and Thomas Rømer (2010) warn that higher education risks becoming a place without a genuine possibility for creativity, change and wonder. Denise Batchelor points out that contrary to the dominant discourse on student identity and learning approaches within higher education:

[Student] voice is exploratory, uncertain, not always in control, and suffers periods of obscurity in thought that seem like failure. It can be an apparently unproductive voice without an immediately clear result, whereas the student voice today is required to be demonstrably productive rather than speculative, matured and developed rather than maturing and developing. (Batchelor, 2008, p. 54)

Batchelor argues that learning processes is rarely possible to capture in categorical taxonomies for skills and competences, and that teaching strategies in everyday practice are not essentially structural, functional and linear phenomena, but plastic and to a large degree unpredictable events. Ronald Barnett and Kelly Coate (2006) make a similar point regarding core curriculum in higher education. According to Barnett and Coate: “A curriculum is not the kind of entity which exists straightforwardly in the world. Like the unicorn or the yeti, it is not so much that no one has ever seen a curriculum in full flight; it is more that it is the kind of entity that never could be immediately witnessed.” (Barnett & Coate 2006: 154). This points to a need for a new and more elastic and flexible language for describing everyday learning and teaching processes.

However, the critical literature referred to above does not itself offer a clear and developed alternative language. On the contrary this counter-discourse brandishes terms such as “authenticity”, “personal growth”, and “individual voice” as key factors. Critically speaking, and as shown in recent research into teacher and student voice in higher education (Bengtsen 2014; Bengtsen 2012; Bengtsen 2011), it is hard to form an alternative productive vocabulary if we build on parameters such as that a core curriculum can never be immediately witnessed, or that the Bildung-like qualities of learning outcomes are betrayed at the very instance it is captured in categories or taxonomies. This educational “escapism” (our term) is confronted with “pedagogical paralyzes” as it cloaks and black boxes the very learning processes educational theorists are interested in bringing forth and articulating.

We acknowledge that educational frameworks building on either the thought of alignment or maturation and growth are all needed to manage and reflect the challenges of teaching and learning experiences within higher education. We argue that such, often mutually exclusive, discourses all share the ideal of progression - and thus have saturated the language of educational theory with a semantics of progression. However, many teachers and students do not necessarily relate their experiences within higher education to linear progression and development, but often feel they are sidetracked, lost, or in others way do not meet the wished for outcome of the university as an institution. Most educational theories are well aware of these dilemmas in specific teaching and learning practices, so this point does not in itself create a new turn in educational theory. Such theories, nevertheless, assimilate such diverse and multiform experiences into a language of coherence and progression. Therefore, we need a language in educational theory which is able to embrace and articulate phenomena which are contradictory, ambivalent and mongrel in a more sensitive and loyal way. Such a renewed language makes possible new ways of reflecting pedagogical practice e.g. by the use of metaphor at first and later on by more systematic conceptualization -with the aim of enriching and change pedagogical practice through such a new vocabulary.

This claim is based in theories on metaphor going back to Nietzsche’s point that “Improving our style means improving our ideas” (Nietzsche 2008: 440), which can be seen mirrored in the spanish philosopher José Ortega

Y Gassets's understanding of the relation between word and world: "Now then, imagine the importance of a language or system of expressive signs whose function was not to tell us about things but to present them to us in the act of executing themselves." (Ortega 1975: 138; see also Bengtson 2014). In modern linguistic theory this point is brought forth by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and John van Maanen (1995). This builds on the understanding that the words we use influence the way we think and talk about our practices as students and teachers, which then influence our thinking, talking and structuring of learning processes, courses, learning outcomes, and institutional structure. We argue that pedagogical reflection through a vocabulary more sensitive towards the mongrel nature of pedagogical practice may facilitate, what we call, a gelatinous pedagogy which perceives learning processes as forms of 'entanglement'. Like a jellyfish that uses its trailing tentacles as 'drift nets' as it tumbles and hunts for prey in no particular pattern, gelatinous pedagogy, metaphorically speaking, approaches (networked) learning experiences, activities and settings, not as orderly structures - like the circuit board - that you can view from above, but as filigree swarming and pulsating tentacles whose destination cannot be anticipated in e.g. measurable learning outcomes or categorical taxonomies for skills and competences.

The jellyfish is a thing of wonder and flux. It is a creature of obscurity and enthrallment. The jelly with its gelatinous semi-transparent body and dangling trailing tentacles, looks more alien than earthen. Jelly is something outside categorical taxonomies. It is the epitome of estrangement and entanglement. Jelly, as learning processes in higher education, is transformative and transfigurative by nature. This entails, that the learning experience or outcome of a particular student is like a jelly at sea with labyrinthine erratic tentacles not always in control but continuously plastic and pulsating as they go (or float) with the flow. Our point is, that students' "swarming networked learning" needs to be tackled by the teacher by being loyal to these gelatinous (in)coherent, (in)compatible and (in)consistent processes and by deploying a gelatinous pedagogy that can appreciate and take care of these pulsating unstable and entangling processes. And, it needs to be tackled through establishing a gelatinous vocabulary that is able to embrace and articulate the entangling and non-sensical dimensions of the student's learning processes. Here, the jellyfish as metaphor offers itself as a way into the heart of these things.



## Weird learning

Certainly, in order to grasp the variation and difference in students' learning processes, we need to make these learning processes visible by articulating them and drawing them out using an analytic vocabulary - but not in Hattie's sense of a tight and neat semantics. As Barnett points out learning processes may indeed be "paths to strangeness, which are likely to be disturbing" (Barnett 2007: 122), full of "half-formed thoughts (...) or sets of conflicting ideas." (ibid.). It is not easy to predict the learning outcome or the developmental processes of student voice and identity, and, as Janet Parker stresses, students not yet having attained the requisite disciplinary framework of understanding "make their own, producing an idiosyncratic and extra-disciplinary account of the phenomena." (Parker 2005: 158).

For example, teaching the graduate interdisciplinary course "Webcommunication" at Aarhus University the teacher and students experienced a mutual need for such a jelly-like vocabulary in order to tackle the gelatinous contraction-pulsations between allurements and assignments, bewilderment and boredom, contentment and resentment during the course. The course was an "un-fixed" unforeseeable networked, group based process including a series of processual pass-fail assignments where neither teacher nor students could well foresee the end stage of the process. In other words, the course, the course material and the course assignments evolved gradually as the student's discovered what they needed to know in order to go where they wanted to go. Teacher and students were in effect a swarm of jellies at sea constantly in danger of stinging each other, getting beached or lost at sea. Abandoning teaching and learning as familiar and fixed circuit board structures with secure learning goals and outcomes leading to sustainable growth and formation often causes frustration, opposition or even, at times, anger. Here, the teacher endured the anger and resentment of her

students as she appreciated the jellyness of the students' struggle to survive the course while the students endured the unpredictability, confusion and constant destabilization of the course and the ways it was presented and framed by the teacher as they slowly and reluctantly came to appreciate - but not praise - the jelly-like qualities of the course and what it did to their thinking, talking and practice as students. Between teacher, students and course framework a constant fluctuation, change, destabilization (also of the teacher's authority) and adaptation were going on that only in a burgeoning way had become meaningful and rewarding when the course was completed. However, the pronounced resentment and resistance present in the midterm evaluation was all but gone in the final evaluation even though the course remained puzzling to many due to its intentionally nonsensical, entangling and bewildering design. This example is included to show how gelatinous pedagogy is possible and might actually be practiced within higher education. That is, the seemingly systemic constraints that might exist within the system can be overcome or worked around through arguing for a gelatinous pedagogy through a jelly-like vocabulary. By preparing students to survive and navigate in the incomprehensible, incoherent and nonsensical courses can, by being gelatinous and apparently incoherent or nonsensical, provoke students to find their own (non)sensical or (in)coherent ways of being creative, risk-taking and enduring within the system.

Inspired by the jelly-like features described above we suggest that terms such as "weirdness" and "allure" must enter the vocabulary used to describe and define learning processes in higher education. These terms are drawn from the work of the contemporary American philosopher Graham Harman (2011; 2005; 2002) who uses the terms in an endeavour to reorient the focus of philosophical discourse back to the things themselves and their own strange, enchanting and discomfiting worlds. Harman advocates what he calls a "weird realism" (Harman 2011: 17); in which we acknowledge that things and events are not merely products of whatever forms of constructivism in vogue in a given western society today, but actually small galaxies in themselves rich with strange powers and "living" a life of their own influencing everything else around them, things and humans alike. We argue that learning processes in higher education are equally "weird" in the meaning that they unfold in different and nonlinear ways. Each learning process; each student's own way into a different set of ideas or paradigm of understanding, is defined by the particular type of allure valid for the specific student. As educators, and as researchers into educational theory, we should aim at trying to understand these quirky, eccentric and sometimes bizarre ways of learning and becoming which stick to each student like glue or gel. Learning processes should not be understood as progression measured in a given taxonomy, but as a definite form of educational "charm" which takes hold of the student and transforms him or her. Harman writes that, for this particular form of educational drawing-in, he:

can think of no better technical term than charm. This word should be heard with overtones of witchcraft rather than those of social skills. What is at issue is not some sort of people-pleasing faculty in things, but a sort of magic charm or elixir that we sense in each thing, as when warriors devour tiger hearts or druids cautiously approach forbidden trees. The charm of objects is their innocent absorption in being just what they are (Harman, 2005, p. 137)

However, in contrast to culturally high status words like "authenticity" and "personal growth", nothing of value or status is guaranteed when confronted with the world-changing powers of higher education. From our daily practice as teachers and supervisors at the university we know that nothing can be promised or guaranteed for the particular student. Not everyone succeeds in learning important and lasting things during their time at the university, and they may even give up and drop out before any degree is obtained. Every lure may be a trap, every seemingly golden opportunity may turn out to be a disappointment. Harman describes this doublesidedness of higher education in a rather poetic manner:

We may sacrifice years to thankless study in order to hunt some golden unicorn glimpsed one day in the library, even though it may never enter our grasp and no one else may even believe that we ever saw it. [...] all great styles charm us even if they deliver us to bondage in repulsive places, whether these be libertine dungeons, Nibelung underworlds, fields of chemical warfare, or outright slaughterhouses. (Harman, 2005, p. 141)

Not to set a sombre and sinister tone, but to point out, that we need a language to describe the "half-thoughts" mentioned by Barnett, and the "idiosyncratic" and abnormal ways of learning mentioned by Parker. Like with the jelly we are confronted with phenomena that are not easy to classify and fend off as commonplace challenges which can be dealt with in a straightforward manner. As with the jelly, we are drawn into a world in which phenomena exist which we never thought possible, not abiding to the general laws of sound biological

and sensical lifeforms. Seeing the jelly may be a metaphor for seeing the world in a new way and at the same time sensing the discomfiting implications this idea necessarily bring about regarding our hold on the world, and ourselves. Terms like weirdness and allure remind us of jelly-like qualities. They are not intended as quasi-romantic longings for a transcendent world more sublime, nor are they brought forth as a pseudo-existential projection of “tough love” in learning environments. What we really need to acknowledge is that learning processes are exceedingly hard to pin down and predict. This does not mean, however, that they are impossible to describe or articulate. We need a jelly-like language to bring out these sometimes plastic, sometimes contradictory and contrainuitive aspects of ways of learning in higher education. Let the jelly be our guide.

## Crafting the unpredictable

The professional development of e.g. jazz musicians (Sudnow 1978), students of Digital Design (Löwgren & Stolterman 2004), professional or aspirational computer gamers (Nørgård 2012) and craftsmen in general (Sennett 2008) isn't characterized by linear or taxonomic processes, coherent progression or consistency in learning outcome. Nor is it characterized by authenticity or personal growth. This becomes apparent if we look at students' first encounter with Digital Design at Aarhus University. Here, they are, for the first time in their life, asked to prove their theoretical understanding through partaking in design processes, demonstrating critical design thinking and constructing digital designs. Many of the students are unpleasantly surprised when they discover that an excellent explanation of theories, concepts and exam subject is not sufficient. If they have constructed an unreflective or context insensitive design through a frivolous design process they will get a poor grade. Furthermore, they will also get a poor grade if they are unable to inform their design process and design decisions through the use of critical and theoretical design thinking. Here, remit and prowess must be expressed as a gelatinous conversation between a group and digital or physical (craft) materials (Nørgård 2012).

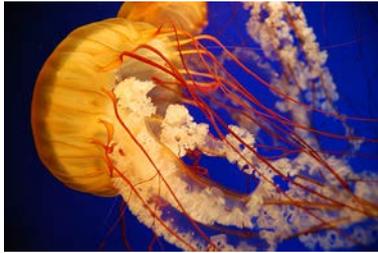
Hence, it is not an education aiming at individual authenticity or personal growth, but, rather, an education that on the one hand, requires the student to be obedient to (digital) materials and the concrete design situation and, on the other hand, requires the student to shed his or hers individual identity and don a hive mind identity as a member of a design team (Schön 1987). Even at the exam, which is the only individual activity during the semester, the student has to answer for the groups' work as she or he tries to scholarly analyse and reflect on what was designingly done and theoretically implemented in order to develop their digital design.

Within Digital Design, the jelly vocabulary fits well and informs the learning processes going on as they are often incoherent, jagged, disruptive and even corrosive when compared with the general view on and expectations of progression both as taxonomical categories *and* personal growth within higher education. Like the jelly, teaching is organized as a built loose network of nerves in a ganglion-like structure incorporated into a gelatinous material. Like the jelly, the teaching design of Digital Design can at first seem like a pointless creature of annoyance and pain. Only slowly, the potential of jelly-like learning and gelatinous pedagogy becomes apparent to the bewildered student as she or he comes to appreciate entanglement, unpredictability and constant change as a prerequisite for *Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World* as the subtitle of a core book within Digital Design reads (Nelson & Stolterman 2012). In this way, learning is not something that can be measured on a taxonomic ladder or mapped out as a logical structure. Neither is it the expression of an innate talent or prodigious individual. It is an active-passive process of staying with the craft, incorporating the craft through repetition and design thinking and moving from being an individual towards becoming a competent expression of that particular craft (Nørgård 2011).

As a student you surrender your identity and let yourself be incorporated in the jelly-like learning process. Becoming a student in Digital Design is in this way an act of obedience: “To become skilled required, personally, that one be obedient” (Sennett 2008, p. 24). But becoming a student of Digital Design is not a matter of submission to a teacher, a curriculum or an institution. Rather, it is about gelatinous swimming in a sea of jellies, and letting yourself be alienated from your ‘authentic and personal’ self through letting your self become entangled in a network of co-learning. Consequently, letting the student learn to be entangled and gelatinous in his or her way of thinking also implies that you let go as a teacher and let the students tumble over themselves and appreciate this swarming learning process as networked learning. They need to be shaped by their craft without breaking. Becoming a digital designer within higher education requires reflexivity, responsibility and commitment (Löwgren & Stolterman 2004). It is about letting your thought or action become shaped by processes put in motion, it is about daring to be ‘jellyfied’ through enduring the sting of jelly and succumbing to tentacular life:

learning by doing, so comforting a nostrum in progressive education, may in fact be a recipe for cruelty. The craftsman's workshop is indeed a cruel school if it activates our sense of inadequacy [...] inadequate personal performance hurts in a different way than inequalities of inherited social position or the externals of wealth: it is about you. Agency is all to the good, but actively pursuing good work and finding you can't do it corrodes one's sense of self. (Sennett, 2008, p. 96-97)

Daring to (let the student) succumb to a process of inherent networked estrangement and entanglement (sometimes without going anywhere) can in the end be corrosive to the student's - and teacher's - sense of self. Learning is neither in the student nor in the teacher but in the pulsating and transfiguring messy process emerging outside the control of both. Students and teachers must become malleable targets or structures for whatever jelly-like qualia that emerge from the learning process gently and fearless put in motion by the teacher as guide.



## The limits of jelly

We suggest the jelly as a metaphor for the qualities of language in educational theory, which enable a making visible of learning processes and nuances of student voice that are black boxed or caught in a blind angle by taxonomy-based language. One could argue that this does not make visible but on the other hand makes specific situation abstract and everyday reality poetic and mesmerizing in an imagined and artificial manner. One could also argue that by using the jelly as a role model for articulation of learning processes an epistemic hierarchy is established, thus giving privilege to certain types of learning processes and thinking styles. On the contrary we argue for a plasticity and inclusiveness in the language we use to cast our educational theories and descriptions of pedagogical practice.

We do not argue that the jelly should be a new educational totality that all other semantics should worship. Instead the jelly should be seen as a mirror that, by its strangeness and weirdness, reminds us of our own relatively strangeness and weirdness to each other as different and sometimes almost alien modes of learning, teaching and being. In this way the jelly in its monstrous and alien form, paradoxically, draws out what is most humane, open and solidary in us. However, it must be stressed that a gelatinous pedagogy cannot, and should not, either displace or substitute for other approaches to higher education pedagogy, but solely be understood as an alternative and complementary educational perspective, meaningful in some learning contexts and not others.

## The potentials of jelly

As a metaphor, vocabulary, framework and thinking tool the jelly is an incoherent being, fragile and vulnerable on one side, and dangerous and powerful on the other. By using jelly as a 'master trope' for thinking about networked learning and educational design within higher education we wish to present an alternative to less jelly-like and more circuit board-like ways of thinking about networked learning. Networked learning conceived as a circuit board structure is a safe and secure metaphor that both teacher and student are comfortable with. Thinking through the circuit board, flexibility and complexity are mapped out and can be assessed as a layout of pathways by which the student can choose his or her particular path through the system. Within this framework networked learning is established like electric currents along fixed pathways.

In this way, the learning process is conceived of as a well-ordered logic structure where flexibility and creativity can be planned ahead through course planning, learning goals and outcome. In this way, the circuit board is explicit in its model for learning progression and personal growth; networked learning as circuit board layout can be monitored from beginning to end. Here, we suggest jelly as a new framework or master trope for networked learning. Thinking through the framework and vocabulary of jelly, networked learning can be grasped as a gelatinous filigree network-lump in flux. Our point is, that a particular student's attainment of

meaning cannot necessarily be secured or catered for by establishing the outcome of a certain course for a student.

Conclusively, we point to the following three findings plus a suggestion for the further work needed in this prospect. This is presented in the four headlines as follow which use the jelly-metaphor as a unifying semantic cluster:

**1. Making a jelly-like vocabulary:** We suggest a new turn in educational theory; one which deals with diversity and transformation, hereby heralding educational theories which foreground educational run-ups, educational crashes, knowledge vacuums, crippled ideas and flawed learning outcomes. By using the jelly as a signpost and image for the strangeness and unbalanced progression of learning processes in higher education, we wish to conceptualise the weirdness of processes of learning and becoming at the university. This can lead to existential and cognitive fatigue, exhaustion and resignation. Together with a language for end points for learning goals, we need a language for students who never meet these goals, but still endure higher education and obtain a degree. Maybe they've met other goals of a different and more alienating character, which cannot be measured on the scales of "mainstream" thinking.

**2. The jelly at sea:** We argue that learning processes assume a life of their own and build on a particular form of allure present within each student's mode of becoming. Students are not drawn into a given field of knowledge in a vague view-from-nowhere-like manner. They catch a glimpse of their own particular golden unicorn which they set out to hunt down, even though it may be the bane to further educational experiences for them. This glimpse may also be a glimpse of a darker and more disturbing creature than the unicorn - it may indeed be a glimpse of an educational monster; a terrifying prospect of the limitations of one's own understanding and cognitive powers. The jelly holds many possible worlds of progression or downfall. Just as the jelly is 'at sea' both literally and metaphorically, the students are at sea as well. They are in a strange midst of vulnerability, power and fate.

**3. Networked learning as entanglement:** We suggest the jelly as an image of networked learning as a phenomena which do not present itself following a particular pattern, but instead a learning dynamic which swarm and tumble over itself. As the jellies swarm we argue that learning experiences swarm as well, creating often complex and challenging tasks for the particular student to focus on the most central and relevant learning outcomes. Our point is that the learning outcomes of the particular student do not necessarily match the expected learning outcome of the assessment criteria used for evaluation of student products. It is the task for the educator to be able to understand this "swarming learning", and to be able to guide the students in different ways according to their individual modes of approaching key aspect of a given core curriculum.

**4. Future work:** The glimpse of the jelly should be met by a pedagogy of care and solidarity. Learning processes have an open ended character – they are infinite and may possibly drain the will to learn of the student. If learning can be jelly-like in the manner argued for in this paper, we need a gelatinous pedagogy as well. This points to our future work; to launch a gelatinous pedagogy in order to match the "jelliness" of learning processes in higher education. A gelatinous pedagogy must be inspired by this tension, which Nietzsche makes visible (2006); the want to speak into a discourse understood by the majority of the paradigm, but at the same time speaking strange things because of ones displacement and personal visions. Nietzsche points to the "motley colours" (Nietzsche 2008: 621) of personal understanding and development, and reminds us that "our actions shine alternately in different colours, and are seldom unequivocal - and there are often cases, also, in which our actions are motley-coloured." (Nietzsche 2008: 622). Likewise we need a motley-coloured pedagogy, which match the mongrel world of higher education learning and being. In order to do that, the educator must be able to assume jelly-form in order to grasp the conditions for learning which challenge the students.

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