

KUNSTWURST: CRITICAL CONTROL AT THE SAUSAGE FACTORY

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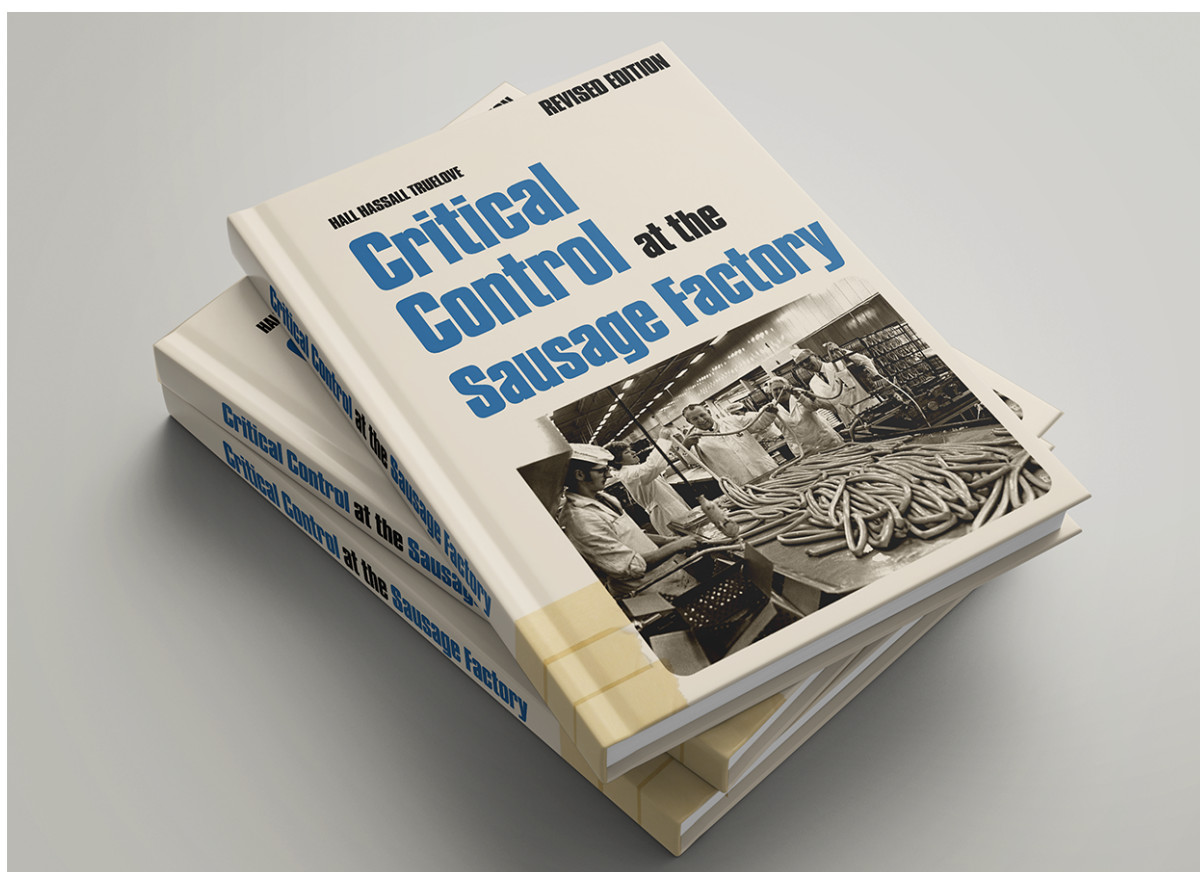
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In *Who Rules This Sausage Factory?* Neil Smith writes that much meat has ‘passed through the grinder’¹ since Karl Marx's wurst-shaped comparison in 1867, and much meat has passed through since Smith’s renewal. Within *Capital Volume 1*, Marx writes: “...a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.”² Marx here is referring to school, but in recent years this description applies fittingly to the contemporary university and those within it, now “in service to capital.”³

There are two notable events that endorse the metaphor. First, the UK government's Jarratt Report (1985) declared that "universities are first and foremost corporate enterprises"⁴ and would henceforth operate around financial priorities as opposed to the acquisition of knowledge. As a result, market forces dictate how teaching and learning is delivered, aligning more closely with the centralised, growth-led model of mass production. Second, the Bologna Process (1999) outlined that higher education must proceed according to comparable benchmarks of *quality*, bringing all degrees in line with conventional, academic subjects worldwide. *Bolonification* oversees an exercise in global flattening, foregoing a currency of difference in an attempt to achieve standardised similitude across the sector. In order to maintain these standards and uphold quality, the university obsesses over metrics, favouring activity which can be more easily quantified, and ignoring that which cannot. In a system of units, "not everything that is important is measurable, and much that is measurable is unimportant."⁵

The result of such priorities is that exercises in quality control are in effect, *quantity control*, as methods for assessing quality always defer to the numeric: student satisfaction, retention, grades, etc. Within the standardised model, not even the consumer is exempt, and is subjected to frequent measurement at modular points throughout their degree. Assessment of quality is a brutal slice; but this crude cross-section is not a reliable index of the individual, the centre from which meaningful pedagogies are based. The intention here is to achieve parity, though what aims to create equality instead achieves the opposite when it overlooks the inherent, associated differences among individuals. It's about the *consumer*, but it's *not really* about the consumer. For the *art-school*, the individual has always been at the centre; an essential component of a diverse and democratic community, each pursuing an individually appropriate curriculum. An idealist would prefer not to mark altogether, invoking the open and experimental spirits of the past. But, we are contractually obligated to do so, and through resignation, we are all complicit. Smith writes: "Yet on a daily basis we all trek into the sausage factory. Some of us are the sausages, some of us put the sausage meat in skins, some of us just tend the machines, and some are the managers - but all of us are in Marx's educational factory."⁶

'The polony will resemble you', I think Tristan Tzara once said? Acknowledgement of this position is a passive first step. Recognising that action is indeed possible would be an appropriate and active second step. Nadine Kalin writes: "Ultimately, critique and subversion of educational structures need to occur from both the outside in and the inside out of the institution, for artists and educators alike are in a struggle to (re)activate the institution of education as a site of critique, a place worth protecting and subverting for this very reason."⁷ As Damien Page states, "Every healthy organisation needs rebels"⁸, though he is encouraging *constructive* rebels here, those that offer practical solutions as they go against the grinder. But what if we stick with the saveloy, and fully embrace the metaphor? By leaning into the sausage, we will not only uncover fitting methods of assessment within food production, but also existing tools within the university that can help return the individual back to the pedagogic centre. As such, we propose the *Kunstwurst*, or 'art-sausage', a process and product which borrows heavily from the factory, but subverts the standardised convention. *Kunstwurst* signifies an acknowledgement of our current situation, but doesn't just accept the status quo. It's a sausage-shaped signpost that points backwards to a more wholesome time, standing as a multiplicitous index of the possibilities currently within our reach. *Kunstwurst* offers a pedagogic approach that takes a holistic, longitudinal view, as opposed to a snapshot in time when the subject might, or might not be ready. It's an attitude to learning that is ongoing: a *wurst* without end.

Looking around the sausage factory, we soon become aware of *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point* (HACCP), a method for ensuring and maintaining standards within food production. On closer

inspection we discover *critical control* and *longitudinal integration* which present themselves as intriguing stages within a metaphorical, sausage-making process. Despite its clinical connotations, HACCP adopts a holistic position that is interested in an ongoing, critical dialogue with all those involved within production.

Critical control offers an interesting alternative to *quality*, or even *quantity* control. Qualitative and quantitative assessment points make performance-related, value judgments upon output. These occur at end-points in a process from which we are unable to return: we should never go back to a banger once lit. An unfortunate byproduct of end-point quality control is a reluctance to invite feedback on the *work-in-progress*, instead presenting the perfected *fait accompli*. But a cooked sausage is irreversible, and there is a pointless futility to retrograde questions following judgement. *Critical control* on the other hand could sidestep this final evaluation, creating an ongoing opportunity to be just that: *critical*. This stage is never summative, always formative, carried out at regular points along the way. The question here shouldn't be: *is it good?*, or: *is there enough?*, but: *can this be questioned?* And *questioned further still?* The question is the catalyst that allows us to maintain critical possibility, and keep curiosity for learning alive. I suppose this is the point: the *Kunstwurst* isn't a sausage that one cooks. It involves a method that sits more closely to nurturing, caring, or *curing*. For curing is not cooking: who knows when it's ready?

Longitudinal integration is the antithesis of the slice, instead taking a holistic, lengthways view along the *wurst* and acknowledging all the associated and interconnected components involved in its production. It is an ongoing procedure that focuses on the process as opposed to the product. In Spain and other parts of Europe, *integral* is an adjective attached to foodstuffs that include ingredients in their entirety, as opposed to the refined or bleached alternative. We are continually told about the benefits of *roughage*, for keeping us regular - but what about learning? Leftovers from school teach us that mistakes take away from the mark, and we learn to reject experimental methods in case we get things wrong along the way. *Longitudinal integration* allows us to incorporate and reframe mistakes as key points of learning, a spinning of the *botulus* as it were. Within Victorian times, the sausage was termed a *little bag of mystery* due to its dubious inclusions. As to what went in, many turned a blind eye. Speaking of which, they went in. And eyelids, lips, rectums too. What might not conventionally be considered *butcher's quality* is deemed an accepted ingredient within the sausage. Questionable indeed, which is exactly the point: the *Kunstwurst* openly invites questions in order to preserve its critical potential.

Both *critical control* and *longitudinal integration* were adopted instinctively as methods of learning and assessment in the legacy *art-school*. A dialogic mode of delivery was preferred, permitting an ongoing, critical conversation between students and staff.⁹ These autonomous pedagogies were made possible in the UK by the Coldstream Report of 1960, which stated: "Within the simple structure that we propose, art schools can construct their own courses free of complicated rules."¹⁰ In 1964, surveying the new DipAD (Diploma in Art and Design), historian Quentin Bell wrote: "Henceforth it should be possible for a college to develop entirely on its own lines, to follow no matter what eccentric course it pleases, and it does not matter how eccentric that course may be if only the teachers are sufficiently enthusiastic."¹¹ This approach extended to assessment where colleges carried out holistic evaluations set on their own terms. Some didn't mark at all. When discussing the historic *art school*, an ideal exemplar that often turns up is that of Black Mountain College, an institution that continued the formalist teachings of the Bauhaus, combined with the experiential and experimental pedagogies of John Dewey.¹² We are told that there were "no letter grades at Black Mountain College"¹³ neither upon entry nor exit. In place of exams or assessment, ongoing questions were asked to further "critical,

creative, and responsive acumen.”¹⁴ We’re reminded that *acumen* is a ‘tapering point’, but the ends of a *Black Mountain Sausage* are vague. If students wanted to graduate, then they would decide when this might be and were responsible for creating their own, handcrafted diploma certificates to prove that they had met their own standards.¹⁵

As the *art-school* became subsumed into the larger, more conventional university in the 1980s and 1990s, the institution had to quickly adopt its host’s factory settings: “Learning outcomes were written, timetable software was used, modularity sliced the courses into credit chunks and regulations were applied.”¹⁶ As one anecdote goes, when faced with the threat of modularisation, one senior *art-school* academic locked themselves in a room, emerging some time later hailing an ingenious solution: they wouldn’t implement modules, but *pretend* that they had implemented modules.¹⁷ On paper a dotted line was drawn at arbitrary points across the semester implying curricular separation. To the bureaucrats this was nodded through as a division, but to those in the know it was *business-as-usual*. Most incorporated *art-schools* continued in this way well into the new millennium, delivering the DipAD in all but name. These strategies proved successful until successive revalidations eradicated such sleights, replacing the *recipe-handed-down* with a new, improved formula.

So how can we adopt *critical control* and *longitudinal integration* into contemporary higher education? If we look hard enough, a longitudinal alternative is already here in the form of *synoptic assessment*. We would like to think that synoptic means ‘with eyeballs’ (or something like that) in ancient Greek. It doesn’t, though that won’t stop us drawing sausage production parallels. Synoptic assessment is defined as; “a form of assessment which tests candidates’ understanding of the connections between the different elements of a subject.”¹⁸ The idea is to look at everything together, as opposed to an isolated sample, which is extracted and taken away for assessment. Filio Constantinou outlines that; “...synoptic assessment can promote a holistic and coherent delivery of the curriculum, thereby having a beneficial effect on teaching and learning.”¹⁹

To illustrate this, we can imagine two different ways to design a BA (Hons) Sausage Making course: the first follows the conventions of constructive alignment, the second takes a synoptic approach. The conventional approach – summative assessment-heavy and highly modular – has separately assessed modules for: (First year) *Meat and Equipment Chilling, Meat Cutting, Meat Mixing, Spice Adding*. (Second year) *Casing Warming, Grinding, Sausage Stuffing, Sausage Tie-offing, Pinching and Spinning, Pricking and Hanging*. (Third year) *Drying and Chilling, Curing, Cooking and Serving*. Each of these modules carries a grade. These grades are averaged out at the end of the course to determine how good the trainee *salumist* is. But an actual sausage made by this student tastes only as good as that one module they dodged or bodged along the way – if they flunked the *Spice Adding* unit their sausages will taste terrible. In the synoptic approach, students learn how to make sausages in much the same way, but their grade is determined by how tasty their best sausage is at the end of their third year, when it is plated up for their tutors to feast on. It doesn’t matter how many bad sausages were made along the way, just how delicious their best sausage is. A good sausage is a good sausage, however and whenever it was made. If a student can make a nice sausage, they can make a nice sausage, and they deserve a degree to prove it. In a synoptic system, students have the freedom to experiment and make mistakes, innovate and invent, challenge and discover. They can find their own ways to make the individually appropriate sausages that will help them stand out in a crowded (meat) market.

Let’s wave a different metaphorical wiener in another direction for a moment, away from constructive alignment and towards *deconstructive realignment*. Let’s imagine that the student is the sausage – a

mixture of dubious-quality *psycholoffal* that has been stuffed into their skins by parents, caregivers, teachers, friends, strangers, the mass media, social media and AI chatbots. Constructively aligning them to a set of *our* learning outcomes is like baking them in a subject-specific oven, solidifying their mismatched innards and leaving them with a thicker but more brittle skin. Perhaps, instead, we could gently slice open their not-yet-cooked casings and gently tease out their mixed-up raw innards, then offer up a range of healthy alternative ingredients for them to substitute from. A sensitive deconstruction of their selves would enable a more wholesome realignment to a truer purpose than we could ever imagine in our course design committee meetings. Versions of this psychoanalytical approach to creative learning is not uncommon in the history of Fine Art education and often isn't easy or comfortable for students. In the hands of unhinged head chefs it can be downright dangerous, as many graduates from Fine Art courses in the 1970s and 1980s will attest. However, in properly trained hands, exposing the curriculum hidden beneath the skin of each individual can be liberating and empowering for students. This is true student-centred learning, in accord with approaches such as compassionate communication, transactional analysis, liberationism and non-hierarchical pedagogies. Hotdog steam to follow.

So, we've covered *longitudinal integration*, but what about *critical control*? And the ongoing, reflexive conversations which sidestep summative assessment? The category error we make when we grade creativity can be traced back to the introduction of BA (Hons) art degrees in 1974²⁰ – the DipAD that preceded it was a straightforward end-of-course pass/fail affair. This requirement to award final classifications gradually bled back through each course until everything from induction to graduation became about slicing up the art-sausage and assigning a value to each medallion. However, hidden in plain sight, just in front of the (Hons), is an extra-ordinary version of a degree, which might allow us to put all those dangerous knives back in the drawer. The *Ordinary degree* could offer an opportunity to do away with classifications, and then grades, modules and learning outcomes, altogether. For those of us resigned to our fate in factories where the *butcher's apron* flies, this might make for a tasty banger. Unlike the Honours degree (but just like the DipAD), an Ordinary degree does not require a classification to be determined at its conclusion. This is why it is also sometimes called a 'Pass Degree' – it is a 300-credit point degree devoid of Firsts, Two-ones, Desmonds or Richards. It's usually reserved for the handful of anti-heroic graduates that failed their dissertation or dropped out half-way through third year. But if we really want a wholesome art-sausage, free from ultra-processed summative additives, the Ordinary can be it. With minimal qualitative academic judgements required at the end, there is no need for carefully measured oppression²¹ throughout. If this conjures up a vision of a factory owner boiling in their skin, "*No (Hons)? No Firsts, like I got? 60 credits of income lost?*", then perhaps there is a less healthy, but much more marketable, alternative. To bag a full bachelor's degree with honours, a student just needs to demonstrate they have met the Level 6 FHEQ descriptor in full²². We can take our time curing 300 credits of ungraded sausage, before battering it in a 60-credit-point pan of synoptic fat, saturated with everything the full honours degree demands. An end-of-course 60 credit 'honours module', where students reflect on and critically evaluate the successes and failures in their first 3000 hours, would enable us to synoptically assess our students' longitudinal learning without ever having punished them with rewards²³ along the way. We don't even need numerical or letter grades at this point – we can chomp straight into a classification.

If the price we pay for minimising the negative impact of grading is the battering we must give our students in this 'honours' module, there might still be better ways to make the grades than we usually do. Humans are bad at making absolute judgments²⁴, but when we use rubrics to assess, we are making absolute judgments. We could draw up a rubric of the things that make for a good sausage – aroma,

sizzle, texture, spiciness etc, and then taste some sausages and score each one accordingly, but this kind of *absolute* assessment has been proven to be much less reliable than one based instead on *relative* judgments²⁵. Fortunately, practical methods for harnessing the power of *comparative judgment* have been around since the 1920s²⁶. Comparative assessment simply involves tasting two sausages and deciding which is the best one, then repeatedly tasting more sausage-pairs until sufficient data has been gathered. An algorithm then puts the sausages into order from best to worst. Comparative assessment in its full modern form is a bit more complex than this, but the principles are the same. Comparative assessment is particularly suited to reliably judging the relative merits of creative works and the outcomes of open-ended tasks. Where rubric-centred systems struggle with students ‘going above and beyond’, comparative assessment values what is on the plate, regardless of pre-determined assumptions²⁷. If we must rank our students’ creative prowess, we owe it to them to rank as reliably as possible. In comparison with this comparative assessment sizzler, our old rubric-sausage tastes rank.

Many will find our de-assessment sausages hard to swallow, but the growing body of evidence in support of ‘Ungrading’ provides robust support for the arguments we dare you to make. When you get called a silly sausage and are told that getting rid of grades is a recipe for disaster, the Ungrading literature offers food for thought. Influenced by the master-chefs Friere and hooks, Alfie Kohn, Susan D. Blum, Jessie Stommel and others have superb ungrading cook-books out, full of fantastic ideas for your imminent pedagogic banquet, but if you want hard proof right here right now, here is a story of what happened when we put theory into practice and took away the grades. Central to the ungrading philosophy is the relationship between grading and student motivation. *Intrinsic* motivation comes from within and is characterised by curiosity, discovery, personal growth, and an embodied sense of purpose²⁸. In contrast, *extrinsic* motivation is driven by external pressures and rewards²⁹. For many students, graded assessments create a pressure to compete within their peer-group and function as tangible rewards. These grade-driven pressures and rewards tend to promote extrinsic motivation and diminish intrinsic motivation, reducing the likelihood of students persisting and performing. Rethinking assessment as a mechanism to promote intrinsic motivation was one of the motivations for rethinking of our graded assessments. A meta-analysis of 106 studies into motivation³⁰ found that a tangible reward (such as a grade) decreases intrinsic motivation, but a verbal reward (in the form of non-controlling informational encouragement) can increase intrinsic motivation.

The studio environments that characterise art education provide the ideal spaces to facilitate such verbal encouragement in the moment of learning and is the natural habitat of the authors of this text. *Introduction to Illustration* occupies the first four weeks of the BA (Hons) *Illustration* course at Leeds Beckett University. Instead of submitting an assignment at the end of the module, students frequently update an online journal, capturing outcomes from the wide range of mostly studio-based learning activities. At the end of the module, assessors scroll through each student’s journal and look for evidence that the learning outcomes have been met – if they have, the student passes. Students quickly secure their first 20 credit points and are reassured that they are in the right place, studying the right subject. Importantly, the frequent verbal rewards students received whilst engaging in the first four weeks of studio activities are captured in their journals and act as reminders of these motivational encounters. Module 4.1 is pass / fail, with no number grades awarded, which minimises the tangibility of any perceived external reward. The continuous nature of the journal allows tutors to quickly identify students who are not engaging and initiate compassionate interventions. Students who initially struggle to engage are often reliant on extrinsic motivation to force them into action, with a looming deadline acting as the ultimate disciplinarian. The continual nature of the journal-based assessment short-circuits the ‘cram it just before the deadline’ strategy that extrinsically motivated students have utilised

previously and prompt early conversations to help get students back on track, well ahead of the module deadline. The retention measurement for first year BA (Hons) *Illustration* hovers around the 98% mark, well above the UK's Office for Students regulation benchmark, and module 4.1 is a key component in the *Illustration* course's retention strategy. Central to the success of 4.1 is the pass / fail assessment because, by minimising the tangible reward of a grade, it enables greater emphasis to be placed on frequent verbal rewards, leading to an increase in intrinsic motivation. Pass/fail also discourages students' unhelpful comparisons with each other which helps promote a collective and mutually supportive atmosphere, fostering a community of intrinsically motivated learners. With threat of imminent grading removed, students on the *Illustration* course are rewarded with learning³¹.

The example above is only a short sanctuary stretching the initial four weeks of a student's first term. A chipolata in the dry-aged scheme of things. Extended experiments have been trialed on other courses at Leeds Beckett University such as BA (Hons) *International Tourism Management*, who removed grades for the whole of the first year, instead focusing on wellbeing and project-based learning. BA (Hons) *Performing Arts* followed suit, allowing *performance* to allude to its theatrical former self, as opposed to its contemporary twinning with efficiency, productivity, and output. The shift from comparison to compassion resulted in a strengthened community and greater sense of belonging.³² Similar trials of differing lengths have been offered at other UK institutions, such as a 'science of happiness' module at Bristol University which explores practical and theoretical aspects of personal and collective wellbeing. During the unit "There are no exams but students who complete the course receive the nice boost of 20 academic credits – a sixth of what they need to pass their first year".³³ At Copenhagen Business School (CBS), grades were removed for first years which reduced stress during this period of non-assessment, but this anxiety soon returned when students began to anticipate assessment following the initial grace.³⁴ When we understand that ungraded allowances can indeed be made with institutional consent, then we begin to question the point of metrics altogether. The more we play with the instruments of measurement the more inadequate they appear. In a disruptive quest to author an alternative to assessment on BA *Illustration* at Leeds Beckett University, one of the *ideas-that-never-quite-made-it* included a set of collectable stamps. The scheme was going to be attached to a studio module known informally as *The Process Brief*, an experiential learning unit which focussed more on the activity than the outcome. A stamp would be awarded in return for a student supplying evidence of notable experimentation, and could be collected in a dedicated booklet. The module briefing featured a tin of 'Quantity Street' (an intentional *egg-corn* of the similarly named confectionery) to highlight that in a module that focused on breadth of process, the more one tested, the better. Invoking the saving schemes of yesteryear, each stamp could be redeemed for one percentage point of the student's final grade. Achieving more than a hundred percent would be possible - and encouraged - which drew assessment into the same ridiculous territory as *giving-it-110%* or guitar amps that could go to eleven. Some might say 'baloney'.

In his book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, scientist and philosopher Carl Sagan puts forward the *Baloney Detection Kit*, a set of strategies for encouraging interrogation and critical thinking. Sagan's sausage-spotting tool emerges from a field of science, and urges for substantive and inclusive debate in order to interrogate a broad range of issues.³⁵ Despite its calls for quantification where possible (measurements in recipes are good as an *optional* guide) the kit's aims are to ultimately eradicate pseudoscience. In recent years we have observed a *Frankfurtive* presence in sausage factories, from schools through to colleges and universities, one that is used to continuously justify *Balonification*. The deception here is that learning can be planned, measured and controlled with the same clinical accuracy as disciplines such as science and medicine. However "Being a student is not a disease, teaching is not a drug and

education is not a cure”.³⁶ Evidence-based education emerged in the 1990s as a response to the perceived lack of 'rigour' in education research at the time.³⁷ Proponents of a 'science of learning' promote knowledge rich curricula, theories of 'cognitive load' and strict taxonomies, all of which claim the same guaranteed efficacies as lab-controlled experiments. *In vitro* lies the problem: most evidence-based, education research is undertaken under rigid conditions - examinations, classrooms, schools - designed to influence and interface with the existing mechanics of government education policy. *Rigour* is a stiffness, a stubbornness that refuses to think differently, so as to maintain the status quo. The result is that all sausages begin to look the same, aiming for identical endpoints, homogenised and processed. It's enough to set Sagan's *Baloney* alarm bells ringing. Such parity of puddings aims for equality, but some sausages *are* more equal than others, requiring unequal amounts of filling. We call for an *Equitabaloney* that caters for all shapes and sizes: a *Kunstwurst*.

So, what is *Kunstwurst*? A curriculum? A course structure? A new kind of art degree? A new way of assessing or not assessing? A portfolio? A document? A conversation? A journey? A question? Maybe, it's *all these things*. It's a promise to keep in mind that there used to be a more meaningful way, and retains a hope that what has been lost is still possible within contemporary higher education. In embracing Marx's metaphor, this has enabled us to look openly at aspects of the institution that might enable us to return the individual back to the pedagogic centre. Oddly enough, there's radicalism in the regs. We can fight admin with admin, and hoist bureaucracy with its own petard, if we're willing to put in the time into turning these to our advantage. For who is to say that the sausage is *bad*? We assure you, parts of it are *excellent*.

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