

Conceptual Insight Memo

Purpose

To capture emerging theoretical insights, conceptual synthesis, and future scholarly ideas.

Memo Header. Essay

Insight Title: Living My Dissertation

Date:07/30/26

Origin of Insight: Misalignment with program policy

Me to ChatGPT: I am experiencing one of the core principles of my dissertation - that educational difficulty can arise from a mismatch between learner and system rather than from learner incapacity. Review the attached documents and help me communicate this experience more clearly, as part of my reflexive memoing.

ChatGPT: Yes. The situation is unusually close to the central argument of *Spikey Minds* because the problem is not simply that a policy exists. The more revealing issue is the institution's apparent inability to distinguish between the **purpose of a rule** and the **standardized administrative pathway used to satisfy that purpose**.

Your dissertation repeatedly argues that educational difficulty can arise from a mismatch between learner and system rather than from learner incapacity. It explicitly reframes the problem as one of "recognition, translation, and alignment," rather than correction of the individual. Your current experience gives you a first-person instance through which to examine that claim.

For reflective memoing, I would preserve some uncertainty about the institution's motives. You know what you are experiencing; you do not necessarily know yet why the institution is refusing the request. That distinction actually makes the memo analytically stronger.

Context

I am currently experiencing an institutional conflict that closely mirrors the phenomenon at the center of *Spikey Minds*. I need one additional credit during the current semester to maintain the financial aid that enables me to remain enrolled full-time. I am not asking the financial aid office to change its requirements. I am asking my academic program to allow me to take one Dissertation in Practice credit earlier than its prescribed sequence—the semester in which I am, in practice, already doing the corresponding dissertation work.

The distinction matters.

I am not behind in my doctoral progress. I am ahead. I was prepared to begin interviews and anticipated being able to defend earlier than the formal course sequence assumes. Yet the institutional structure appears unable to translate that progress into a slightly different curricular pathway. As I described while experiencing the situation, "I am not asking financial aid to change their policy—I am asking OCL to adapt my course schedule slightly."

This transforms what initially appears to be a scheduling or financial-aid problem into something much more interesting for my research: **What happens when the learner's actual developmental trajectory no longer corresponds to the trajectory encoded within the institution?**

Standardization and the Institutional Mental Model

My dissertation argues that educational institutions remain organized around industrial-era assumptions of standardization, predictability, linear progression, and cognitive uniformity. *Spikey Minds* describes standardized educational environments as privileging “cognitive smoothness, linear progression, and performance consistency” while devaluing nonlinear forms of development and reasoning.

I am now encountering a version of this phenomenon that is not primarily cognitive but **temporal and administrative**.

The prescribed sequence assumes:

course C → course D → completion.

My actual trajectory appears to be:

course C + work associated with D → earlier completion.

The educational objective has not changed. The required work has not disappeared. I am not asking for reduced rigor, waived requirements, or a different degree. I am asking whether the timing of one credit can correspond to the timing of the actual intellectual work.

The system appears, at least thus far, to privilege fidelity to sequence over fidelity to the learner's actual educational trajectory.

That is precisely the kind of institutional mental model I discuss through Senge. Institutional structures can reproduce assumptions because those assumptions have become so embedded in organizational practice that they become largely invisible. My dissertation describes this as a systemic blind spot: institutions may continue privileging standardized expressions and pathways because their underlying mental models determine what can be recognized as legitimate.

The question therefore becomes larger than whether I am permitted to take one credit early:

What is the course sequence actually designed to accomplish, and what happens when compliance with the sequence begins to undermine rather than support that purpose?

Personalization Versus Accommodation

This experience also exposes an important distinction between **accommodation and personalization**.

My request is not fundamentally that an institution compensate for an individual deficit. It is that the institution recognize a legitimate educational trajectory that does not precisely match its predetermined sequence.

That distinction is central to *Spikey Minds*. The dissertation argues that cognitive pluralism should function as “structural infrastructure” rather than as a marginal accommodation.

This experience makes me wonder whether personalization remains conceptually trapped within an accommodation paradigm. Institutions may be willing to modify a pathway when a learner can demonstrate a recognized impairment, but less prepared to modify that same pathway simply because doing so produces better alignment between the learner, the work, and the educational objective.

If so, the paradox is striking.

A system may have mechanisms for responding when a student cannot keep pace with its standardized sequence, while having far fewer mechanisms for responding when a student moves through the intellectual work differently from the standardized sequence.

That is not cognitive pluralism.

It is standardized education with exceptions.

The Double Empathy Problem at the Institutional Level

This experience also helps me think differently about the Double Empathy Problem.

DEP explains misunderstanding as a relational mismatch rather than a unilateral deficit. My dissertation extends this beyond individual interactions to institutional relationships, including:

institution ↔ community
standardized ↔ relational

and argues that reciprocal misunderstanding becomes structurally asymmetric when institutions possess the authority to determine which interpretation is legitimate.

That asymmetry is visible here.

From my perspective, the proposed solution is straightforward: permit the credit during the semester in which the dissertation work is occurring, satisfy the degree requirement, preserve financial-aid eligibility, and allow progress toward completion.

The institution appears to be interpreting the same situation primarily through sequence, policy, and administrative authority.

Both sides may therefore be perceiving the same situation through different systems of meaning.

But the relationship is not symmetrical.

I must make myself intelligible to the institution. The institution is not equally required to make itself intelligible—or adaptable—to me.

That is an important distinction for my dissertation. **Reciprocal misunderstanding becomes institutional misalignment when only one participant bears the burden of translation.**

Epistemic Asymmetry

The situation also raises questions of epistemic authority.

I possess unusually detailed knowledge of my own dissertation trajectory: what work I have completed, what work I am currently doing, what remains, and what sequence makes intellectual sense for completing it.

Yet institutional legitimacy resides elsewhere. The system ultimately determines which sequence counts, which work can be attached to which semester, and whether my interpretation of my own educational trajectory is administratively recognizable.

This does not automatically constitute epistemic injustice, and I should be cautious about making that conclusion before I understand the institution's rationale. But it provides a useful site for examining **epistemic asymmetry**.

My dissertation defines epistemic asymmetry as the uneven distribution of “credibility, interpretive authority, and legitimacy” across individuals and institutions.

The important research question may therefore not be simply:

Why won't they let me take the credit?

It may be:

Whose knowledge about a learner's educational trajectory is considered authoritative, and under what conditions can the learner's own knowledge alter the institutional pathway?

Distress as a Signal of Misalignment

Perhaps the most personally difficult—and theoretically significant—part of this experience is its psychological impact.

I have found myself becoming increasingly distressed by what appears, from my perspective, to be an unnecessary institutional obstacle. In my contemporaneous account, I wrote that I was struggling to continue dissertation work because of the emotional disruption created by the situation.

That experience intersects directly with one of the more important claims in *Spikey Minds*: distress should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that something is wrong within the learner.

The dissertation instead considers anxiety, disengagement, loss of purpose, and educational withdrawal as possible **signals of misalignment between learners and educational environments**.

That distinction feels very different from the inside.

The institutional obstacle produces distress. The resulting distress can then become another problem attributed to the individual. Support mechanisms may consequently focus on helping the individual tolerate the institutional environment rather than asking whether the institutional environment itself could reasonably change.

This creates a potentially recursive process:

institutional rigidity → misalignment → distress → individual support/accommodation → institutional structure remains unchanged

If that interpretation holds, the system treats the consequence of misalignment while preserving the conditions that generated it.

That may be one of the most important observations to retain from this experience.

Transformative Learning: Becoming the Participant

This experience is also a disorienting dilemma in the Mezirow sense, but it is complicated by my role as researcher.

I am not simply experiencing institutional misalignment. I possess a theoretical vocabulary through which to recognize it while it is happening.

I am simultaneously:

learner → participant → researcher → interpreter

That recursive position is unusual.

Earlier in my educational life, an institutional conflict like this might have been interpreted primarily as personal frustration: *Why can't I make this work? Why am I having so much trouble with something everyone else seems able to navigate?*

Now I find myself asking different questions:

What assumption is the system protecting?

What purpose does the rule serve?

Is the rule accomplishing that purpose in this particular case?

Who has authority to recognize an alternative pathway?

Why does adaptation become possible only after a learner is categorized as requiring accommodation?

At what point does administrative consistency become educational misalignment?

That shift in questioning is itself transformative learning.

I am revising the frame from:

“I am having difficulty navigating the institution.”

to:

“I am observing the relationship between a learner and an institution that may be unable to adapt when the learner's actual trajectory diverges from its standardized model.”

The latter does not automatically make the institution wrong. It changes the unit of analysis.

The problem is no longer located exclusively in me.

It resides in the relationship between **learner, policy, institutional mental models, educational purpose, and organizational capacity for adaptation.**

The Larger Contradiction

There is also a profound irony in experiencing this within a doctoral program concerned with organizational change.

Spikey Minds argues that contemporary institutions face a structural contradiction: society increasingly requires adaptability, cognitive plurality, systems thinking, and nonlinear problem solving while educational systems remain organized around predictability, standardization, and uniformity.

My current situation may represent that contradiction at a micro level.

The innovative solution is extremely small: move one credit.

Yet even a small deviation may become difficult when organizational systems are optimized for consistency rather than responsiveness.

The important issue is therefore not the credit itself.

The one credit is a probe into the system.

It reveals where authority resides, what kinds of variation the organization can tolerate, how institutional actors interpret personalization, whether policy serves educational purpose or becomes an end in itself, and how much adaptive capacity actually exists within an institution devoted to studying change.

Emerging Reflexive Insight

The most significant insight from this experience may ultimately be that **standardization does not only constrain learners who are struggling. It can also constrain learners who are progressing in ways the system did not anticipate.**

That expands my understanding of *Spikey Minds*.

Cognitive pluralism is not merely about giving different learners additional support. It requires institutions capable of recognizing **nonlinear trajectories of competence, development, participation, and contribution.**

A truly personalized educational system would therefore ask something different from:

How do we make this student fit the prescribed pathway?

It would ask:

What is this pathway intended to accomplish, and is there another legitimate way for this learner to accomplish it?

My current experience provides an uncomfortable opportunity to observe the difference between those two questions from inside the system.

Perhaps that is why this experience feels simultaneously infuriating and intellectually important. I am not simply studying institutional misalignment anymore.

I am experiencing the phenomenon while possessing the conceptual framework to recognize it.

And that may make this moment particularly valuable for reflexive memoing: not because my experience proves my dissertation, but because it gives me an embodied case through which to interrogate, complicate, and potentially refine its central claims.