# Introduction: What Is Studying?

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# 1 Introduction: What Is Studying?

Hans Schildermans
University of Vienna

"*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* reason! is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment." With these words, Kant draws the opening paragraph of his famous text *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* to a close.[1] The essay was an intervention in an ongoing debate about the precise meaning of enlightenment, at a moment when the notion began to pick up speed in intellectual discourses of the time. The debate was initially sparked by the theologian and educational reformer Johann Friedrich Zöllner who in the December 1783 edition of the *Berlinische Monatschrift* critically observed that "under the name of enlightenment the hearts and minds of men are bewildered," while raising the very question "What is enlightenment?" in a footnote to the text.[2] Within a year the journal had published the responses by Kant and Moses Mendelssohn and soon after many other writers started to contribute to the discussion. The author of an anonymous article published in 1790 remarked that the debate had turned into "a war of all against all" in which several intellectuals tried to lay claim on the precise meaning of enlightenment, and the author went on to distinguish twenty-one interpretations that the concept had already received.[3] Even today, philosophers continue

1 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt, trans. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58. Schmidt's translation uses 'understanding' instead of 'reason'.

2 James Schmidt, "What Is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 2.

3 Schmidt, "What Is Enlightenment?" 32.

to reinterpret the notion of enlightenment, imbuing it with a new meaning every time.[4]

## *The Lure of a Question*

In a similar way, the concept of studying has gained renewed importance in philosophical and theoretical discourses about higher education and the university as well as arts and activism in recent years.[5] Not only does it allow for opening new perspectives on the traditional tasks of the university (research–teaching–service), it also sheds new light on the relation between university and society, and the future of the university. The concept affords perception of the studious aspects of university research and teaching, uncovers those aspects of higher education that are hard to grasp drawing on the discourse of learning, and invites thinking about other ways of involving the public in the university. However, and in a like manner to the confusion in the enlightened circles of the end of the 18th century, the precise meaning of the notion seems hard to grasp. Different understandings oscillate between studying as an individual activity versus studying as thoroughly collective, the political engagement of study versus its sense as withdrawal from the world, and studying being predominantly a mental or intellectual affair versus the bodily and practical characteristics of study. Moreover, there are diverging conceptions of the spaces, times, languages, knowledges, bodies, and materialities of studying.

The aim of this special issue is hence to raise the question of "what is studying" once again. More than looking for a motto (like "Sapere aude!"), the objective is to gather a variety of evocative statements on the matter and to further conceptualize the tensions mentioned before. The special issue seeks to gauge the richness of the concept for educational thinking, probe its potential as a research lens, and experiment with its potential for enacting alternative higher education futures. The background of this intervention are the discussions that took place during the 3rd annual meeting of the *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education Society* with the conference theme

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4 The most famous example of such re-reading is probably Foucault's eponymous text. See Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

5 See, for instance, Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

"Reclaiming Study Practices," organized in September 2019 at KU Leuven, Belgium. During that conference, both the appeal and the internal contrasts of the concept of studying became manifest. Shortly after, a call was launched to invite authors to write short essays to further develop their take on the question drawing on a limited set of references.[6] Therefore, in the special issue, readers will not find extremely well-grounded arguments, armed to the teeth with sophisticated sources. Readers looking for final answers or conclusive findings will probably only be disappointed, and should better put down the special issue here as none of the essays included provide such answers or findings. However, if readers are interested in learning about different perspectives on study and are willing to put their own thoughts at play while going through the different essays, it is strongly encouraged to read further.

The essays gathered in this special issue draw on a rich variety of sources, such as the philosophies of Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, Vinciane Despret, John Dewey, Vilém Flusser, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Ivan Illich, Tim Ingold, Erin Manning, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Rancière, Bernard Waldenfels, and Slavoj Žižek. More importantly, however, these essays also engage with existing practices of study. Sometimes, these are practices that have a long tradition in the history of the university, such as the seminar; sometimes it concerns more experimental practices that renegotiate the boundaries of the university; and, sometimes practices that the authors have experimented with themselves take center stage. These practices are taken as initial impulses for further theorization of the question of what studying is. Lastly, next to the philosophies and the practices mentioned before, there was also a particular situation that provided food for thought for those contributing to this issue. Between the launch of the call and the deadline for the first essays, universities all over the world went into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden move to online modes of study co-constitutes the historical situation within which all of the essays are written, and is even taken as a starting point for reflection and experimentation in some of them. Before presenting the contents of the special issue, the next paragraphs roughly outline the philosophical and theoretical debates in which the different contributions intervene.

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[6] I would like to thank the other members of the organizing committee (Jan Masschelein, Maarten Simons, Joris Vlieghe, Lavinia Marin, Benedikte Custers, and Gary Wong) for sharing their ideas about the design of this special issue, the reviewers for their helpful feedback on initial versions of the essays, and Amon Neely for proofreading the final essays.

## *Practices of Studying as an Alternative to the Capitalized University*

Nowadays, there seems to be no shortage of studies that denounce the predicament of the contemporary university, while proclaiming its imminent demise. Neoliberal reforms, entrepreneurial objectives, and capitalist interests have thoroughly transformed the higher education landscape, moving the university from its public mission while leaving "the university in ruins," to quote from the title of Bill Reading's seminal book.[7] The discourse of excellence, it is argued, hollows out the social role of the university and undermines its guiding value-framework by reframing the aim of every activity in terms of a self-committed optimization in an abstract environment, i.e., an environment that is solely intelligible in terms of comparison and competition.[8] From an educational perspective, one of the repercussions of this transformation has been the narrowing down of the educational dimension of the university to learning conceived as the individual acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competences within a market-like supply-and-demand environment.[9] It is against this background that the question of how to inhabit the ruins of university rises and it is here that practices of study seem to offer a vital alternative to the capitalized university.

First, drawing *practices* into the focus of attention of philosophy and theory in higher education blows a breath of fresh air into the often ossified debates and criticisms of the university in the knowledge economy. Oftentimes, these discourses take the university as an institution as point of departure. The underlying mindset of this reasoning tends to suggest that rethinking the idea of the university would provide guidelines for institutional reform to create a university for the public good. However, reinvigorating the dialectics between idea and institution has not led to any practicable reform.[10] More importantly, in turning our attention to abstruse and often lofty ideas, practices that

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7 See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). For an insight in the literature on academic capitalism, see Bob Jessop, "Varieties of Academic Capitalism and Entrepreneurial Universities: On Past Research and Three Thought Experiments," *Higher Education* 73 (2017): 853–870.

8 Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 32.

9 Gert Biesta, "Interrupting the Politics of Learning," *Power and Education* 5, no. 1 (2013): 8; Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "The Governmentalization of Learning and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 401.

10 Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski, "The Future is Always-Already Now: Instituent Praxis and the Activist University," *Policy Futures in Education* (April 2021): 4.

academics concretely engaged in and continue to engage in often remained neglected or forgotten within these discourses. Putting practices center stage, hence, allows for reformulating the problem of the future of the university in a post-critical way, namely in terms of an ongoing experimentation with the practices of study that still find a place at the university.[11] Important to note is that this does not only concern practices traditionally associated with the university, such as the lecture and the seminar, but also more recent initiatives such as collective experiments that enact a frontline pedagogy and create new spaces where the university can interact with its publics.[12]

Second, it is vital that we reframe these practices as not just practices associated with the university in general, but as practices of *studying*. In doing so, study practices offer an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of learning that reshapes the university in a capitalist image. In contrast to learning, study foregrounds collectivity instead of individuality, contingency instead of planned productivity, indeterminacy instead of predictable outcomes, and hesitation instead of goal-directed action.[13] In that sense, study foregrounds the spontaneous, informal, and often undertheorized aspects of educational situations that escape capitalist capture and constitutes a counter-force to different logics of control and oppression imposed by educational institutions or the political status quo.[14] However, this does not mean that the modus operandi of study practices is purely critical or denunciatory. Practices of study interestingly proceed often in an affirmative mode while enacting an occasion for different possible futures to make themselves felt to the collective of studiers engaged in those practices.[15] The different essays that make up this special issue all contribute to the ongoing reclaiming of and experiment with practices of studying as an alternative to the capitalized university.

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11 For a post-critical understanding of the university, see Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, eds., *Post-Critical Perspectives on Higher Education. Reclaiming the Educational in the University* (Rotterdam: Springer, 2020).

12 Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "The Public and Its University: Beyond Learning for Civic Employability," *European Educational Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (2009): 212. For the notion of frontline pedagogy, see Jan Masschelein, "Turning a City into a Milieu of Study: University Pedagogy as 'Frontline'," *Educational Theory* 69, no. 2 (2019): 185–193.

13 Tyson Lewis, "The Fundamental Ontology of Study," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 2 (2014): 166–168.

14 Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education. Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 14–16; Derek Ford, *Communist Study. Education for the Commons* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 45.

15 Hans Schildermans, *Experiments in Decolonizing the University. Towards an Ecology of Study* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 137.

## *Presenting the Special Issue*

The special issue contains three parts. The opening part, under the heading *Studying as Politics and Pedagogy*, takes first steps in sketching out what studying is, and pays particular attention to the social, political, and educational dimensions of practices of studying. *Studium* is the point of departure for Jacopo Rasmi's reflections on study. *Studium* refers here to an experimental practice Rasmi performed together with an artist friend, on the one hand, and to the etymological roots of studying that he mobilizes in order to conceptualize this experiment. Identifying transfiguration, immediation, and ecological agency as crucial dimensions of hyper-study, forcing us to become students, Rasmi sketches a powerful alternative to the current artistic–academic discourse of research creation under capitalist capture. In a way, Yves Citton takes the relay from Rasmi in further uncovering other instances of how study has been taken up in academic, artistic, and activist practice. Aided by insights on *studium*, *black study*, and *études*, he reassembles studying in terms of fostering processes of counter-addiction and self-alienation that resist the education-based mode of teaching and the hard sciences model of research. Citton's essay leads us into the undercommons of the university where fugitive subjectivity finds a last refuge. The question of subjectivity takes center stage in Alma Krilic's contribution. She takes issue with the current responsibilization of education that is induced by the learning discourse, making students individually responsible for their learning outcomes. Studying, Krilic argues, always implies a moment of self-withdrawal, in which we are seized by an idea that gives us to think. In that sense, studying is an event that disrupts the accumulative logic of learning and the self-centered subjectivity of the learner. Not only does studying de-center the subjectivity of the learner, it also undermines any strict outcome-oriented approach to higher education, Jakob Feldt and Eva Petersen argue. Drawing on Dewey's writings on the process of inquiry, they conceptualize the experimental dimension of studying in the sense that outcomes are always of the order of the event, and therefore always bring the indeterminateness of radical newness with them. Outcomes cannot be predicted or planned beforehand, but should rather be taken care of as possible consequences of an experimental intervention.

The second part, then, delves deeper into the concrete activities and actions that are performed as part of a study practice. Under the heading *The Arts of Studying*, it gathers reflections on the meaning of practices such as reading, writing, collecting, or assembling for study. Christiane Thompson and Gabriele Weiss open this second part with an essay about the role of academic work, in terms of specific attitudes enacted within the lecture or

the seminar, for the formation and reformation of knowledge. Drawing on phenomenologies of reading and writing, listening and speaking, Thompson and Weiß develop an understanding of the university as a liminal space that is never for always given, but that has time and again to be performed anew. Subsequently, Shoshana McIntosh zooms in on the practice of reading, which makes her think of studying as a digestive practice, a kind of rumination. Inspired by the ethology of ruminants, she pays attention to their ways of gathering materials and chewing them over. Adding to the links that both Nietzsche and Illich already discerned between reading and ruminating, McIntosh outlines a multispecies account of inhuman studying that sheds light on its many versions. In Katie Crabtree's essay, the focus shifts from reading to writing. More than an argument against an all too instrumentalized or formalized conception of academic writing, she experiments herself with the essay as an "essaying"—literally "trying"—manner of writing that does not aim to express what is known, but rather invents ways to dwell in a state of not knowing. Crabtree's contribution is a dramatization of essaying that shows, rather than tells, what writing has to do with studying. Nancy Vansieleghem's text takes a step back from the "traditional" arts of studying associated with the university to point the attention to an intervention by the artist Mark Dion. The *Tate Thames Dig* provides a point of departure for a conceptualization of the meaning of collective fieldwork, assembling the objects found, and presenting them to the public as part of a "cabinet of curiosities." Vansieleghem shows how the river Thames as an ecology of relationships comes to matter in new and unpredictable ways to the studiers gathered around it.

In the last part, *Studying in a Digital Age*, the specific challenges that come with the sudden digitization of many university study practices since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic are discussed and experimented with. The reflections in this part are set up by Carlos Willatt and Marc Fabian Buck's phenomenological account of studying. Critiquing traditional depictions of studying that present it as a purely cognitive and solitary activity, they offer descriptions of the embodied, social, and aesthetic dimensions that are inherently part of every practice of study. Willatt and Buck put forward a memorandum summarizing the many relevant aspects of study that risk remaining underacknowledged or even forgotten while transferring study to a digital environment. The contribution of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons starts from a feeling of perplexity about the move of students to libraries and learning centers to study together, while online courses and performant Internet connection have created the conditions for studying at home (at least one would think). Masschelein and Simons conceptualize this longing for on-campus education and physical places for studying in terms of an

immanent resistance against the screenification of higher education and as an affirmation of the importance of presence of mind and body for becoming a student. The last essay, by Peter Hyland and Tyson Lewis, takes a more practical approach in trying to experiment with what it means to study using the Internet. Starting from an analysis of the distinctions between learning and studying, they propose e-study as an alternative to the dominant discourse of e-learning. Based on their experiences during the experiment *Studio D*, Hyland and Lewis define e-study as an attempt to use the Internet as a pure means without inserting educational ends to make an experience of studious drift possible.

## *Sapere Aude! Reclaiming as Experiment*

The different contributions of this special issue do not only sketch out a variety of approaches to and interpretations of the concept of studying, they also offer a glimpse of new avenues for research in philosophy and theory in higher education. To conclude this introduction, three challenges posed by the different essays will be pointed out. First, there are the issues and opportunities that come with the sudden digitization of traditional university study practices such as the lecture and the seminar. Phenomenological and praxeographic accounts of the lecture and the seminar help to shed light on the educational dimensions of these practices that, as several authors have argued here, have to do with the social, embodied, and aesthetic aspects of these practices,[16] their specific logic of participation,[17] as well as the importance of presence of mind and body.[18] The educational dynamic of the lecture or the seminar is seriously altered, and may even be threatened within online environments.[19] Further research is needed to scrutinize the changes studying undergoes by going digital, while at the same time practical experiments could offer possibilities to turn the Internet into a space for studying.[20] Second, transnational policy-making has severely transformed public expectations of the university and student experiences.[21] Studying could offer

16 See Willatt and Buck, this issue.

17 See Thompson and Weiss, this issue.

18 See Masschelein and Simons, this issue.

19 See also Lavinia Marin, *On the Possibility of a Digital University. Thinking and Mediatic Displacement at the University* (Rotterdam: Springer, 2021); see also Norm Friesen, *The Textbook and the Lecture. Education in the Age of New Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

20 See Hyland and Lewis, this issue.

a lens to map changes within higher education practices and new modes of engagement with the public.[22] Further research is needed to conceptualize the future-making dimension of such engagements while taking into account the nature of studying as an event.[23] This means that the outcomes of practices of studying, even if they were initiated to delve into a public issue, cannot be predicted beforehand or used to "solve" the issue. Rather, as events, they need to be taken care of, which might shed altogether new light on the problem as a matter of public concern.[24] At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that practices of studying such as reading[25] or writing[26] seem to resist or at least slow down an all too easy instrumentalization of the university for social needs. Third and last, studying has become an alluring tactic and practice for new social movements and artistic interventions at the border of or outside the university. Future research could map the educational dynamics that turn people not necessarily related to a university into students (on a practical level, not in terms of institutional admission) by paying particular attention to the precise saying and doings that are inherently part of these studious and world-forming engagements.[27] In that sense, studying is not only of importance to higher education *sensu stricto*, but offers a conceptual tool to further investigate new developments in the arts[28] and activism[29] as well. Important to note is that these developments are not limited to real and physical spaces.[30] Digital spaces also constitute new possible frontlines for a studious pedagogy.[31]

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21 Maarten Simons, "The Figure of the Independent Learner: On Governing by Personalization and Debt," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* (2020): 3–4.

22 Keri Facer, "Convening Publics? Co-Produced Research in the Entrepreneurial University," *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (2020): 22.

23 See Krilic, this issue.

24 See Feldt and Petersen, this issue.

25 See McIntosh, this issue.

26 See Crabtree, this issue.

27 See Rasmi, this issue.

28 See Vansieleghem, this issue.

29 See Citton, this issue.

30 See Hans Schildermans, Joke Vandenabeele, and Joris Vlieghe, "Study Practices and the Creation of a Common World: Unearthing the Educational Dynamics of an Urban Farming Initiative," *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 31, no. 2 (2019): 87–108.

31 See Samira Alirezabeigi and Tyson Lewis, "Studying with the Internet: Giorgio Agamben, Education, and New Digital Technologies," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, no. 6 (2018): 553–566.

It is in finding ways to respond to these challenges that "reclaiming"—part of the conference title "Reclaiming Study Practices"—might acquire a specific significance, namely one that I would like to associate with the motto that Kant linked with enlightenment: *Sapere aude!*—At least, that is, when the motto is not immediately understood in the sense of a call for understanding that allows for discerning valid or authentic practices of study from those that have been debased. Isabelle Stengers reminds us that Kant was not the first to use these words, that they come from the Roman poet Horace, and that his injunction to dare, *aude*, had nothing to do with enlightenment or emancipation in the first place. She explains that Horace wrote "*Sapere aude. Incipe*," that it was an injunction to "begin," to dare what perhaps could be called a first step.[32] Moreover, to grasp how "sapere" might relate to such a first step, she recalls that "sapere" does not only or primarily mean "to know," but also "to taste":

> To taste is not to test, to verify claims, and identify frauds. It is to accept the risk of actual encounters, encounters which may mean sustenance or poisoning. Dare to taste if you wish to become able to know: this is not a formula for a conquering enlightenment but for a cautious, relational exploration, and a situated one, as the effects are […] related to what is at stake in the situation.[33]

In this sense, "sapere aude" is not about the ability to think for oneself or to make use of one's own reason. Rather, it is about a cautious, relational, and situated exploration in the face of an actual encounter that puts "our" very reasons at stake and forces us to reconsider the situation we find ourselves in, to learn anew. In engaging with the three challenges mentioned before, "reclaiming," therefore, does not mean to restore, but rather to experiment, to take first steps in tasting and trying, not knowing where the experiment might lead, which consequences it will have made possible, and what demands will arise in taking care of these consequences. It is with this call that I conclude the introduction and invite the reader to go through the several articles, to taste and perhaps to try. *Sapere aude. Incipe.*

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[32] Isabelle Stengers, "Aude Sapere: Dare Betray the Testator's Demands," *Parallax* 24, no. 4 (2018): 408.

[33] Stengers, "Aude Sapere," 408.

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