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Barr, J. and Griffiths, M. *Training the imagination to go visiting*. In Nixon, J. and Walker, M. (Eds) *Reclaiming Universities from a Runaway World*, Chap 5, pages pp. 85-99. Maidenhead; London: Maidenhead SRHE and Open University Press. (2004)

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3421/>

# **Training the Imagination to go Visiting**

**Jean Barr and Morwenna Griffiths**

## I INTRODUCTION

Jon Nixon's article, 'Learning the Language of Deliberative Democracy' explored languages of hope in relation to the discourses of deliberative democracy. Ours continues this theme of finding languages of hope. Like his article, ours makes people central. It explores a neglected area of epistemology: knowing people. It suggests that we take a critical perspective on the metaphors we live and then re-configure them to think again about the public and private spaces in the universities where we work.

This chapter explores, in the context of university education, the nature of a public space that can accommodate and reconstruct 'public knowledge'. We understand 'public space' to be a *social* space of interaction, rather than a location in physical or cyber space (though it may be that too). We understand 'public knowledge' to be that knowledge which is articulated and/or expressed by all, including those people who are routinely excluded from traditional public spaces. People require public spaces in which they can discover, construct, develop and reinterpret knowledge of various kinds, and, in some cases, use the knowledge to help resolve practical problems they face. The nature of these spaces is changing as society (including its schools and universities) evolves. We point out that the traditional theoretical frameworks of political philosophy are unable to deal with the complexity of social space in today's society. They depend heavily on the notion

of the public 'forum' (or sphere), that is a space available to all citizens - accessible to them and usable by them. This notion is inadequate even within the limited context of Higher Education and its communities.

In criticising traditional frameworks we draw on feminist and other writings which move on from critique to the more positive project of reconstructing knowledge and pedagogy. We use real examples not just as illustrations of our argument but as concrete embodiments of our case and in order to encourage less confining frameworks, processes and metaphors for organising our work in higher education. The examples are drawn from our own experiences. They are offered both as reasons for hope and as aids to the imagination. They point, too, towards greater risk-taking than is encouraged in the current atmosphere of university teaching and research.

## II PUBLIC SPACES AND THEIR USES

The story is told again and again, for example, by Jurgen Habermas, of a public sphere gained (by the liberal bourgeoisie of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and lost (in the age of consumerism, the mass media and the intrusion of the state into the intimacy of the family); it is re-iterated by Sennet, about cities, in *The Fall of Public Man* and critiqued by Robbins in *The Phantom Public Sphere* (see Habermas 1962, recently translated; Sennet 1974; Robbins 1993). The question we must ask of course is: for whom was the social entity of the 'city' once more public than now? Was it ever open to scrutiny and participation by the majority?

If so, where were the workers, the women, gays, Black people? Rosalyn Deutsche believes that those who most lament the loss of the public sphere (conceived as unitary) may be suffering from a form of agoraphobia, panicking at the openness of a truly democratic public sphere, requiring a security blanket against uncertainty (Deutsche 1996: 327).

The rise and fall of the educated public says MacIntyre, coincided with the rise and fall of the philosophy of common sense as taught in the universities (MacIntyre 1987).

MacIntyre acknowledges that this public was very exclusive (and it certainly was – of the working class, women, Catholics - anyone, it would seem, whose ability to reason in the required disinterested, from first principles way could not be guaranteed). He is referring specifically to the Scottish Enlightenment but the point can be made more generally, although any particular ‘educated public’ will work its own exclusions: Protestants, perhaps, or Jews, or Arabs, or gays. Despite this acknowledgement, MacIntyre still argues:

It is only through the discipline of having one’s claims tested in ongoing debate, in the light of standards on the rational justification of which, and on the rational justification afforded by which, the participants in debate are able to agree, that the reasoning of any particular individual is rescued from the vagaries of passion and interest (MacIntyre 1987: 24).

One is tempted to ask who would want to be a member of such a bloodless and exclusive club of rational, ascetic, Christian Scotsmen who can write such sentences. Certainly, any small community such as this, sharing a common culture and sense of purpose *could* of

course believe in its own universal character and disinterestedness ('the power of the best argument'). But surely we cannot.<sup>1</sup>

The bourgeois notion of the public sphere which has been outlined by Jurgen Habermas on numerous occasions requires *bracketing* inequalities of status, proceeding in deliberation and discussion *as if* they do not exist. Yet, to proceed in this way – as if inequalities between the participants does not exist – is unlikely to foster *participatory* parity; on the contrary, it is much more likely that such 'bracketing' (which is how most seminars proceed in universities) will work to advantage dominant groups and to disadvantage subordinates. It is hard to imagine any possible participatory parity between the Home Office, the tabloid press and asylum seekers already in Britain, let alone any would be refugees, facing danger in their own countries. Even for refugees with a university education, fluency in English, and the help of lawyers, parity must remain a chimera, logically as well as in fact<sup>2</sup>, because the Home Office and the tabloid press are

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<sup>1</sup> Related to this, David Noble has written a fascinating account of how the advent of ascetic culture among Christian clerics from the late medieval period 'has led to male dominance over the practices and institutions of higher learning' and continues to exert a 'subtle influence' even today (see Noble 1992: back cover). He shows, through painstaking historical research, [insisting that 'the history of ideas is not the same as the history of people' (Noble 1992: 3)] that the usual story of Western science (told in 'secular retrospect') as *in opposition* to religion, as, that is, a dramatic *departure from* clerical (Catholic and Protestant) tradition and authority, is simply wrong, and ahistorical. 'Western science evolved only half human, in a world without women' is the dramatic opening sentence of his book, which is at pains to underline the *strangeness* of the resulting state of affairs, whilst coming to appear so *normal*. He contests, too, the common assumption that women have always been excluded :

'an assumption that rests on the allegedly enduring legacy of ancient Greece, with its homosocial Platonic academies and Aristotelian misogyny' (pxv)

And he provides an account of anticlerical social struggle as a corrective to this common ahistorical assumption of continuity, as well as to the fatalism it engenders. In his final chapter he describes women's permanent entry, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, into what *was* by then a world without women,

'only to be confronted by another clerical restoration, in the form of a male scientific professionalism that betrayed the same misogynistic and, indeed, monastic habits of the clerical culture it superceded' (xvi).

<sup>2</sup> The argument is sharply made in Stephen Friar's 2003 film *Dirty Pretty Things*. A line summarising the anger behind the film is delivered by an actor playing just such a refugee, a Nigerian doctor, who had worked in the USA, to an English van driver: 'You did not notice us because you do not see us. We are

institutions that are set up precisely to work as powerful interest groups, not as reasonable individuals.<sup>3</sup> As Iris Young insists: ‘The ideal of the civic public as expressing the general interest, the impartial point of view of reason, itself results in exclusion’.

Specifically:

‘By assuming that reason stands opposed to desire, affectivity and the body, the civic public must exclude bodily and affective aspects of human existence’ (Young 1987: 59-66).

Similarly, as Nancy Fraser has suggested, unequally empowered social groups develop unequally valued cultural styles, and the workings of political economy reinforces this imbalance by denying to them equal access to the material means of equal participation, including education (Fraser 1993). We agree. Consider, we would add, the continuing impact of the Bantu Education Act, in South Africa. More than 10 years after apartheid ended Black South Africans are less able to access their legal rights to education than their White compatriots (McGregor 2003). Consider how few working class women contribute to ‘public’ debates on Higher Education policy (Morley and Walsh 1995; Leonard 2002).

Some feminists have made stronger claims. They have scrutinised the notion of reason as impartiality and detachment which holds sway in education and which reappears in many theorists of democracy, including Habermas. According to Habermas, the force of the better argument is what wins in his rational ‘ideal speech situation’. Iris Young contests

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ones who clean your rooms, drive your taxis and suck your cocks.’ The line is as it has been remembered and may not quite accurate.

this on the grounds that *what counts* as acceptable reasons, good grounds and so on, must be understood as *itself* contestable. Further, according to Young, a model of democratic education based on discussion though important, is limited; we need, in her view, a more open notion of communication than mere deliberation, one which does not exclude emotions as beyond the pale, for example, and one which assumes a starting point of distance and difference (even conflict and struggle) rather than togetherness and sameness (Young 1990). This draws attention to the fact that efforts to make the world a more just place depend a lot on developing people's capacity to relate to others as well as on refining people's capacity to discern rational principles of argument and to abide by a particular set of ground rules when engaging in it.<sup>4</sup>

### III WHAT KIND OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION?

If traditional models of discussion are inadequate, what can be put in their place? The writing of Hannah Arendt on the nature of political life is suggestive here.

Hannah Arendt believes that plurality and conflict are *conditions* of public life. Arendt's notion of plurality does not denote *incommensurable* differences, only their *irreducibility* to a common measure or standard. She proposes *storytelling* as an alternative way of constructing knowledge and as a way of engaging people in a kind of critical thinking which is different from an argument. According to Arendt, what is normally intended by the notion of critical thinking (impartial, detached) fails when it comes to seeking to

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<sup>3</sup> There is more detail about more about this systematic lack of parity in Griffiths (2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Gaita (2002), which locates the roots of our capacity for justice and virtue in love and intimacy.

understand *unprecedented* events because such events bring to light the ‘ruin of our categories and standards of judgement’. Such events demand, in her memorable phrase, ‘thinking without a banister’. They demand explicitly judgmental storytelling, aimed at teaching the kind of critical understanding which Martha Nussbaum has described as consisting in ‘the keen responsiveness of intellect, imagination and feeling to the particularity of a situation’ (Nussbaum 1986: 191).

Thus, in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes about totalitarianism in such a way as to move her audience to engage with her in thinking ‘what we are doing’ (Disch 1996: 140). In Arendt’s view of critical thinking philosophy takes second place to poetry. This is because, for her, it is not *abstraction* but considered attention to *particularity* that accounts for ‘enlarged thought’. Being critical, for Arendt, does not call for disinterest, detachment or withdrawal from political commitment. Instead, it requires ‘training the imagination to go visiting’ and this is done by means of stories. By storytelling, she asks, ‘how would you see the world if you saw it from my position?’ The reader or ‘visitor’ is offered a bridge and invited not merely to assimilate different perspectives but to converse with them and to consider how they differ from their own. Deliberate ‘distancing’, making the familiar strange, is also required for critical thought, believes Arendt. By means of *taking the imagination visiting* I am both *distanced from* the familiar and *taken to* unfamiliar standpoints. Serious heartfelt differences remain even where they do not preclude a useful degree of mutual understanding. Similarly, Cockburn draws on a careful analysis of her observations of women’s peace groups working across difference, to articulate ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’ as key concepts in developing understandings across difference. The groups she studied were located in places where



identity and difference 'is a killing matter' (Cockburn 1998; Cockburn and Hunter 1999): Belfast, Bosnia and Israel/Palestine. Yet the women were able to construct enough mutual understanding and common ground to work with each other on the practical problems that faced them. Each woman stayed 'rooted' in her own position, while 'shifting' towards other women in the dialogue by recognising their specific positionings, and her own unfinished knowledge about them.

The recommendation to 'train the imagination to go visiting' is offered as a *social* model of rationality which involves a commitment to disputation. It is suggestive for those interested in a reconstituted higher education. Where her imagination takes *her* is to a place where conflict is ubiquitous, where actors are explicitly partisan and where what is involved is 'taking sides for the world's sake' (Arendt 1968: 8).

According to Arendt, 'civic mindedness' can too often be a façade which suppresses dissent; for her, it is the spaces people inhabit together as citizens which unite them in a political community; it is not a set of common values: 'We call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality'. And, 'for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common' (Arendt 1958: 183). It is the '*space between*' them which they share, not some quality *in* them or some common beliefs which unites people.

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<sup>5</sup> This section about Cockburn has been drafted from memory and may need to be adjusted when the text is to hand..

Undoubtedly, plurality is the political principle par excellence for Arendt: people bring together their interests, and points of view and these are tested, influenced and expanded but not thereby transformed into unanimous agreement. Similarly, Iris Marion Young proposes a notion of ‘differentiated solidarity’. She explains: ‘Most uses of the term ‘solidarity’ assume some sort of fellow feeling or mutual identification, as do its synonyms, such a ‘community’. (Young 2000: 222). However, in our complex and plural societies, she maintains, ideals of inclusion ‘must rely on a concept of mutual respect and caring that presumes *distance*: that norms of solidarity hold among *strangers* and those who in many ways remain strange to one another’ (our italics). The basis of such solidarity is quite simply that *people live together* – in a specific locale or region or, more widely, the world – whether they like it or not.

This plural, political process depends on the creation of public spaces for collective discussion and deliberation where citizens can test and expand their views, a public culture where people’s self-centred perspectives are constantly challenged – but not obliterated – by the multiplicity of perspectives which make up public life. This then requires the creation of institutions and practices (like those traditionally developed within adult education, including university-based adult education) where the perspectives of others, of diverse groups and communities can be articulated and expressed in their own right and in their own terms. Such a requirement ‘affirms the need for group-based organization and voice at the same time that it expresses openness to listening to others and engaging with them in shared public spaces’ (Young 2000: 225).

Arendt stresses the spatial quality of politics and public life: people must be able to see and talk to one another, to meet together in a public space so that both their differences and their commonalities can emerge, and so become subject to democratic debate. In this Arendt shares a metaphor with Liberalism (which continues to be the dominant perspective in Western societies). Both views draw on the metaphor of the public square which is contrasted with the private spaces of the houses where citizens live. Arendt describes this view very clearly: ‘The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state.’ (Arendt 1958: 28).

She also shares with Liberalism a view that a public space is one that is open to all who are able and willing to engage in rational argument. However there is an important difference. Arendt acknowledges real continuing differences and disagreements.

Liberalism, on the other hand, depends on the triumph of the rational argument: ‘rational men will agree.’ It is a view that is still widespread. Annick Cojean articulates this liberal position when she writes, in an article bemoaning the obstacles being put in the way of a well-informed public debate in the UK and US concerning the build up to war with Iraq (such as systematic disinformation and the failure of politicians to get down to the grassroots to ask some simple questions): ‘One would be surprised to note that it is by exploring the differences that we find the most similarities’ (Cojean 2003).

#### IV WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SPACES

In what follows, we consider how political-public space has been understood (a) in terms of the distinction between private and public and (b) in terms of the metaphor of the

public ‘forum’ or ‘sphere’. This is not only of theoretical interest. Our purpose is to use a critique of the current concepts of public space to construct a concept (or set of concepts) which would provide a framework which points up, rather than obscures, possibilities within Higher Education for the accommodation and reconstruction of ‘public knowledge’. We are particularly interested in the spaces in and around institutions of Higher Education where women, gays, Black people, migrants, working class people, Asian people - and any other of the many groups currently under-represented in the class of people creating, articulating and expressing knowledge.

a) *The distinction between private and public*

The sharp distinction made between public and private space is central to the usual concepts of public space used in our societies. This remains true for currently influential versions of Liberalism including Rawls (1972), in the Anglo-American tradition, and Benhabib (1992), a feminist strongly influenced by Habermas.<sup>6</sup> That it is a mistake to make this sharp distinction can be seen from reflection on everyday experiences of scholarship, teaching, learning and researching, in our own institutions of Higher Education. Such activities depend on there being a number of spaces where individuals meet to formulate and re-formulate their understanding of the world, and to devise, learn and practise their skills: in short to ‘produce’ knowledge in all the many senses of that word, related to gaining and expressing factual information, understanding, wisdom and

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<sup>6</sup> The public space is not necessarily a unitary space. For instance, Benhabib argues that Habermasian public space could be construed as plural. Since it is constructed by discourse, ‘in principle there can be as many publics as there are discourses concerning controversial norms’ (1992: 119). She gives the example of the “‘public” sphere of the pornography debate’ as distinct from the “‘public” sphere of the foreign policy debate’ (*ibid*). However the sharp distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’ remains.

skills. Yet these spaces are not quite public: they are not equally open to all: neither are they quite private in the sense that they are open to individuals by virtue of *what* they are (e.g. students, chemists, deans), rather than *who* they are (e.g. Jean Barr, Morwenna Griffiths, Melanie Walker or Jon Nixon) (Arendt 1958).

A familiar and helpful example of the complexity of the divisions between public and private spaces is to be found in the university department. A university department is a place of work, where people are to be found in virtue of their role there – though it is not co-terminous with its physical location [as Ryle (1971) remarked of Oxford University]. It can be described by contrast to the home, and is the ‘work’ part of the work/life balance. On the other hand, it is clear that some of the worry about that balance comes about precisely because one seeps into the other. Doreen Massey describes how in a context of competitive workaholism in current academic life women endlessly try to juggle incompatibilities between work and home demands, whilst men working in the ‘High-Tech’ industries she studied (and, by extension, she suggests, in the academy) spoke of ‘minds being elsewhere’ when playing with their children, but not vice versa, whilst at work (Massey 2001).

Even when the department is viewed as a public place in relation to the home, it is at the same time, not so public in relation to the university as a whole, nor to various policy making bodies – in the UK the funding bodies and central government – nor to various local communities or institutions (e.g. in business, the arts, local government, schools, hospitals and the law). A department’s discussions about teaching or research are not open to the rest of the university, except in carefully worded reports or minutes.

Discussions are certainly not open to the general public. (Going to the Press is a serious matter, as is the content of websites.) Nor are they open to policy makers (Anecdotes abound about successful performance in front of inspecting bodies and how wool was pulled over eyes.)

This complexity of public places in relation to the private is sometimes described as a set of concentric circles, of increasing openness as they become more public. But this is a false description. A university department is rarely the place to encounter educational policy makers and their discussions in the public space of coming to know what is happening in Higher Education. Ordinary members of university departments are rarely included, even as observers in discussions among educational policy makers. Ask any member of staff trying to discover what might be going on among the movers and shakers in the Ministry let alone trying to contribute to their knowledge about Higher Education.<sup>7</sup>

b) *Metaphor*

The distinction between private and public mirrors the metaphor used to describe the space in which public debates occur: the forum of ancient city-states as contrasted with the private houses of citizens. This narrowly physical conception of political-public space may have been adequate once but it has outlived its usefulness. It may well have been true that the (male, free) citizens of ancient times could congregate in a single space in

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<sup>7</sup> See Smith (2001) for an account of how he was offended by Dearing's failure to understand what university teaching means to a university teacher: certainly not 'facilitation' or 'delivery'.

which any of them could make their presence felt. However such spaces no longer exist, even for a single university.

The boundaries defining a university are fluid, fuzzy and difficult to draw. At first sight it may appear that the staff and students of a university make up a small community roughly the size of many ancient city-states. But the community is not so self-contained. Those deeply interested in the teaching, learning, scholarship and research of any given university include all those who might benefit from it, or wish to do so. Consider again the local schools, hospitals, law firms and businesses. Consider all those people who visit from time to time (in person, through email, through the web) to visit the library, engage in dialogue or simply learn from its tutors and support staff. Consider all those institutions in partnership with the university, locally, nationally and internationally: they are in partnership precisely because of their interest in knowledge. In this context there is a very limited application for the metaphor of a universally accessible 'forum' or a 'sphere', even in the attenuated form of, say, an academic council, or a university e-mail system.

Why make such a fuss about a metaphor? As Maxine Greene says: 'A metaphor is what it does. A metaphor, because of the way it brings together things that are unlike, re-orient consciousness, which customarily connects things that are like' (Greene and Griffiths 2002: 85). We want to work with this idea that thinking metaphorically can reorient consciousness. At the same time we remain mindful that thinking with old, stiff, outworn metaphors can fix thinking in unhelpful directions. This raises the question as to how new metaphors might be invented, whether metaphors can be 'timely', and how and why some

metaphors come to be seen as illuminating or a hindrance. The feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw, in an illuminating article on 'Philosophy and the feminist imagination' draws on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

Lakoff and Johnson (1990) point out that much of our everyday language which we may think of as cut and dried and 'literal' is in fact metaphorically structured, in that one sort of thing is conceptualised in terms of another. Examples they discuss are 'Argument is war', 'Time is money', 'Love is a journey'. Some can be seen as kinds of 'root' metaphors in the sense that they underlie a whole host of everyday ways of thinking. 'Argument is war' is like this in that it underlies other terms such as 'winning', 'strategy', 'weak points' and so on. These are *metaphors we live by*, according to Lakoff and Johnson, in that they provide us with open-ended 'gestalts' which organise and help construct our experience to such an extent that they have become 'common sense'. By drawing attention to their root metaphor ('Argument is war') which we do not in fact use explicitly as a metaphor, such expressions are *de-familiarised* and we are thereby invited to reflect on how they affect the ways we think *and the ways we behave* (Grimshaw 2000).

Jean Grimshaw asks us to 're-metaphorise the familiar', to see it as strange, by asking us to consider a new metaphor for the processes of discussion and argument, 'Argument is horticulture'. We are to imagine ourselves faced with statements such as:

We need to water this argument.

This idea needs pruning.

We'd be clearer if we re-potted these thoughts.



These ideas need putting into the sunlight.

This theory won't be ripe until the autumn.

This book doesn't have deep enough roots.

Of course any 'non-ordinary' meanings and metaphors would have to catch on, and given the academic 'cringe' factor the horticultural one is unlikely to do so in our universities.

Grimshaw acknowledges:

Linguistic agency cannot be thought of as an abstract autonomy; our utterances are produced and sedimented by histories which we do not create, and have effects which we cannot ultimately determine, predict or control, and of which we may be unaware. But *within* this history and unwittingness, I believe there is a space for the conscious and intentional operation of feminist imagination, for experimental engagements with metaphors and styles and forms of discourse' (Grimshaw 2000: 204-5).

Feminists have been amongst those who are most interested in freeing up old patterns of thinking, behaving and relating. The project recommended here by Grimshaw, to investigate the role which metaphors might play in the 'feminist imagination' is suggestive for our project in this paper. For it helps point towards 'loosening up' thinking about the public sphere/public spaces in ways which may be more helpful and more 'timely' than traditional, sedimented, ways.

Following Jean Grimshaw's suggestion, we present a new metaphor of public space, in the hope that will help in the task of freeing up ossified patterns of understanding the democratic possibilities of public space in universities. More exactly, it is less a new

metaphor, than an old one with a feminist makeover. We invite re-consideration of the metaphor of 'the body politic'.

In its more traditional forms, the body politic is one in which the head rules, while each of the members play their various parts. This is a metaphor of a bounded body ruled by hierarchies. The feminist philosopher, Donna Haraway, in a series of books and articles gives a richer – and a more startling – notion of the body. This is a notion of a body as network, as connected, as constructed both by discourse and by the materiality of new technologies. Haraway (1991) draws together two ideas governing biological discourse about bodies: the immune system and the cyborg. The immune system, she says, is understood:

Not as a system of work, organized by the hierarchical division of labour, ordered by a privileged dialectic between highly localized nervous and reproductive functions, but instead as a coded text, organized as an engineered communications system, ordered by a fluid and dispersed command-control-intelligence network.  
(211)

She goes on to explain that this discourse has: 'Destabilised the symbolic privilege of the hierarchical, localised, organic body.' She argues: 'Bodies have become cyborgs – cybernetic organisms – compounds of hybrid techno-organic embodiment and textuality. The cyborg is text, machine, body, and metaphor – all theorized and engaged in terms of communication.' (Haraway 1991: 212). Similarly, Christine Battersby (1998) criticises traditional philosophers conceptions of the body as she rather draws our attention to bodies that bleed; to leaky bodies that have no fixed or impermeable boundary; to bodies that are fluid and changing rather than fixed and immutable.

These metaphors provide us with a rich set of possibilities for understanding the public spaces in the networks that go beyond any traditional bounds of universities. They point to the leaky bodies politic that constitute our familiar world of Institutions of Higher Education. They make it easier for us to discern some of the spaces in and around universities where public knowledge is alive and well. They allow us to re-think the spaces where knowledge can travel both ways through various forms of dialogue and expression.

The first example comes from North America. Ross Gray works at the University of Toronto and is also the co-director of a cancer centre. He works closely with groups of patients, drawing out from them their fears and understandings of their health problems. He is careful, as he describes, to work with them, not on them as would happen with classical research subjects. This then opens the way to carrying out a collective exploration of ways of expressing what they have (collectively) learnt in drama – which is used for health education more widely in North America. The research-based drama about breast cancer, *Handle with Care?* was performed across Canada about 200 times. He is now working with a new drama on prostate cancer, *No Big Deal*. (See Gray and Sinding 2002; Gray 2003). One of us (Morwenna) heard about this project at an academic conference in Canada. Getting knowledge from conference presentations is academic life as normal. But consider: this is knowledge gained from drawing on spaces far beyond the traditional, which has now been incorporated into the academy. At the same conference another academic described how her approach to her research had been transformed by coming across Gray's work. Meanwhile, once back in England, Morwenna emailed one

of her research students (who lived in another town and lectured at a different university) to tell him about it. He ordered the books for his own library – and for all she knows they are still in email contact across the Atlantic. A public space, a web of relations has been created; it is a space of a cyborg body politic, dependent for its creation and maintenance on both face-to-face contact and on the technologies of phone, email, word-processing - even mass air travel.

Cynthia Cockburn, a University based sociologist also shifts productively between the university and the knowledge to be found beyond its formal boundaries. She used her university position and knowledge to fund a project, part-research, part-development, part-activist, in which she worked with women in Bosnia, Belfast and Israel-Palestine. Earlier in the article we quoted her explaining that these are places where differences of identity may be lethal. The groups she worked with operate as collectives across the boundaries of such identities. Cockburn learnt from and contributed to these groups (Cockburn 1998; Cockburn and Hunter 1999). The collaboration was more than a rational and verbal exchange of views - though it included many verbal and rational exchanges of views. The project included producing an exhibition of photographs, and visits by the women to observe and to live closely with women from the other countries for short periods of time. The exhibition was intended to be of use to the activist communities who might support the various projects. At the same time knowledge collectively made across the academic/activist boundary has been used to inform academic projects. For example it has informed this one: we cited this work earlier in this article. It reached our attention through a mix of cross-university cyber links, of face-to-face conferences and seminars, and through traditionally printed books and desk-top published material. As with the

previous example a cyborg body politic has been created in this web of relations. It depends on technologies for its existence.

A final example comes from knowledge gained, developed and expressed as part of doing a Ph.D. Jean Rath's doctorate (Rath 1999) evaluated a course which trained rape counsellors. This was not an evaluation in which the university based worker tried to take an external objective stance. It was not just that as a rape counsellor herself, she was an outsider-insider. A major part of the project of creating the thesis was taken up with her exploration of ways she could find to working with rape counsellors to express what it means to do the job. For instance, rather than present their words as short quotations as is usual in qualitative evaluation, she turned their words into poetry (keeping the words and the order, and working closely with the women). These powerful evocations of experience were then part of the academic knowledge she could use, did use, in academic settings: papers, seminars. Other aspects of this academic knowledge included highly theoretical discussion of the limits of knowledge and its expression. But the poems also entered the space of the rape counsellors and the rape counselling training, and had a separate life and purpose there. In short this doctoral thesis uses the public space of esoteric post-modern theory, while it intersects with the public space of rape counselling centres, to construct knowledge for both, drawing on both, differently expressed in each space, but unorthodox in both. Again, as with the previous examples, this network of relations would not have been possible without a range of technologies. Indeed the thesis as a whole is best read in its electronic versions.

In this article we have stressed plurality and imagination in thinking about the role of universities as producers, purveyors and guardians of what we have called ‘public knowledge’. We have stressed the involvement of many publics and many forms of engagement in re-thinking (re-imagining) notions of public space which have held sway until now. It is our belief that traditional meanings and sedimented metaphors restrict and contain and that the time is ripe for new thinking which will open up rather than close down possibilities for the creative development of new understandings of the world (as well as practical solutions to urgent problems). Our argument is that academics cannot do this on their own but have to learn to engage with communities, individuals and groups outside the academy. Specifically, we have suggested that the requirement is for higher education practices in which the perspectives and insights of diverse groups and communities can be treated in their own terms and where the knowledge developed is not just about information or even ‘critical intelligence’ but is about our sense of ourselves and the world, and, a much neglected aspect of epistemology, knowing people.

In the current context, the danger we face of a privatized university system is not a distant possibility, given the prominence of market criteria in higher education as in the wider society. Faced with this, a new, committed approach to higher education is urgently required, one which reaches out in dialogue and partnership with its wider community (local and international) and which, in resisting the equation of ‘community’ with ‘business community’, acknowledges that we live in a deeply troubled world. In such a world, the possibility of engaging the university with the whole community, bringing to bear rigorous intellectual enquiry and creative imagination into the whole range of areas of importance to humankind is surely vital.

Nicholas Maxwell gets it right when he writes in a letter to the Guardian (25/3/03 p. 23):

Academia as it exists at present ... betrays both reason and humanity. The proper rational task of academia is to help humanity learn how to tackle its conflicts and problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. A rational and responsible academia would act as a kind of people's civil service doing openly for the public what actual civil services are suppose to do in secret for governments.

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