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Wall, Gina

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Future Thinking: Imaginative Expectations for the Leaky University

Gina Wall, University of the Highlands and Islands

ABSTRACT
This paper makes particular reference to the University of the Highlands and Islands and asks: Does the geographical distribution of the University offer us new ways of thinking 'university'? The relation between power/knowledge and university structures is explored, as is the notion that university can be thought of as action rather than institution, and the significance of the porous or leaky university which plays out with institutional space is also considered. These ideas are investigated through reference to innovative developments in education from the 1980s to the present. The key projects to which the paper refers are the state institution of the Collège International de Philosophie in France (1984), the self-institution of the Copenhagen Free University in Denmark (2001–2007), and the current European multi-institutional Academy project. These projects provide a series of formulations of university through which the distributed institution is critically examined. Of central importance is the emergence of the notion of the transversity, a mode of thinking, and practising, university as translocational, interstitial and discursive. Drawing on experiences of distance delivery of studio based education in fine art, the impact of the distributed university on learning is explored. Further lines of enquiry are suggested which will aim, in future work, to take cognisance of the technological imaginary which may be at play. This will also lead to future research into the question: How do we mobilise the radically leaky university in order to enmesh knowledge and life in the Highlands and Islands?

Keywords: distributed university; studio learning; distance; pedagogy

In this paper, I offer a critical exploration of the distributed university, which considers a number of perspectives drawn from educational practice and developments, such as the Collège Internationale de Philosophie, the Copenhagen Free University and the multi-institutional Academy project (Rogoff, 2007). Theoretical considerations gleaned from these seminal educational projects act as a lens through which to consider the potential of the distributed university, which is informed by my own institution, the University of the Highlands and Islands. In the course of the paper I will ask: Where on earth is the University of the Highlands and Islands? And does our geographical dispersal offer new ways of thinking 'university'? The writing is informed by my working life within the university, and aspects of the text present my own future thinking, rather than the corporate or institutional perspective of the university itself. I will reflect on experiences in the delivery of studio learning to remote and distance learners at Moray School of Art in terms of the university refigured as transversity – the distributed institution. With this in mind, I will also ask if we can consider our studios and other spaces for learning and teaching outside of the context of what has been described as the “normalising academy” (Berry, Heise, Jakobsen, & Slater, 2002). Crucial to understanding the potential of this radically different formulation of the university is the need to think beyond institutional boundaries, beyond the architectonics of power at play in the traditional university and to embrace the idea of the leaky institution which meshes with the life of the region.

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is a geographically distributed partnership of 13 semi-autonomous Colleges and research institutions with a centralised Executive Office situated in the Highland capital Inverness. The University is spread across an area roughly the size of Belgium, and the relationship between the partners which constitute UHI is often described as a federal collegiate body. However, there are tensions in the model, which can exert a pull between the local and the universal – the college and the university, which means that we need to constantly rethink the site of the university.

As Jacques Derrida demonstrates (as cited in Norris, 1988, p. 25), universities (along with the disciplines of philosophy and art criticism) are sites where questions of power-knowledge come sharply into view. Christopher Norris writes

it is through teaching that the various ‘faculties’ or disciplines retain their power to determine what shall count as genuine, authorised truth. And this scene of instruction is in turn closely linked with an ‘architectonic’
My concern here is not, following Derrida, to deconstruct the academic structures of the university perl se, but to avail myself of the gift of the ‘architectonic’ word play in order to explore the overlay of architecture and power to open a way in to a discussion of the distributed university. If we reflect for a moment on what Norris writes regarding the affinity between the legitimising power of academic disciplines and the architectural spaces of the university, we can see that there is a complex interplay of power, knowledge and authority at work within the very constitution of the university. Norris goes on to write: “Hence the need, as Derrida argues, for a questioning of the faculties that would reflect on the material conditions of teaching practice.” (Norris, 1988, p. 25). The point that Derrida and Norris make is that the values, hierarchies and validating principles of the institution, and indeed the curriculum, are inscribed in the very structure(s) of the university, including its architecture. Norris’ commentary relates to the Collège Internationale de Philosophie, opened in 1984 under the direction of Jacques Derrida (Leitch, 1986, p. 101). Those engaged in the formation of the college demanded an alternative to the old university (Leitch, 1986, p. 105) – a new kind of institution which transgressed traditional disciplinary territory and provided a means to challenge “[e]xisting theoretical-institutional typologies” (Leitch, 1986, p. 102) to facilitate the “loosening and overflowing, of traditional borders and boundaries” (Leitch, 1986, p. 103). Therefore, in order to make new knowledges, new university structures were required, and the new structure of the International College was in fact a kind of non-structure which can be pictured as moving spaces at a succession of crossroads. Their website still reads: “Le motif du croisement ou de l’intersection serait une sorte de charte pour le Collège. / The motif of intersection or crossing would be a sort of charter for the College.” (Collège Internationale de Philosophie, n.d.). While the Collège assigned itself the task of the pursuit of radically interdisciplinary research, its mission was also to create a positive diaspora whereby the institution would become distributed across France and the wider world (Leitch, 1986, p. 107). Therefore, the mission of the institution to be mobile, fluid and light demanded that its founders reflect on its relationship with architecture, that is the very fabric of the university itself.

A comprehensive overview of the role and philosophy of education espoused by the Collège is well beyond the scope of what I am able to discuss here, but the ideas around the new institution’s relationship to the built spaces of the university and its social structures is pertinent to our experiences at the University of the Highlands and Islands. The respective campuses of UHI Academic Partner Colleges are multilayered sites in terms of their status as separate and semi-autonomous tertiary institutions. While the academic community which presides over UHI follows a conventional university model, the dispersed nature of the university campus offers, I believe, interesting ways to rethink the forms of community constituted by our learners, teachers and researchers. Especially if we think this though in terms of a dialogical encounter as a means to activate “the loosening and overflowing” of institutional boundaries as described by Leitch (1986, p. 102).

In a dispersed institution with a historically strong focus on Further Education, the question of the locus of the university can be a vexed one. However, if we look at the University of the Highlands and Islands in terms of a dynamic non-structure, a series of crossings and intersections, rather than frustration, we can begin to see possibilities, new ways of thinking about how we work based upon a productive between-ness. This aligns with the mission of the Collège discussed a moment ago; the inter, or between has a specific resonance for them:

> While it occupies the very ‘centre’ of the project for a new educational institution, the inter has no specifiable content or substance. Whatever constitutes it at any particular moment may change. It is less a substance or a locus than a function. (Leitch, 1986, p. 105)

So the very character of a distributed institution enables us to imagine the university in the terms used by the Collège Internationale de Philosophie’s founders “as light, permeable, and mobile as possible” (Leitch, 1986, p. 106). A fluid university which is constantly rewriting itself from within, and as I hope to demonstrate, also from without its institutional boundaries. The university is therefore less of a place and more a way of doing; university is imagined and practised in terms of what Irit Rogoff writes of the academy. She states – “by which I do not mean an institution but a series of processes and speculations” (Rogoff, 2007).

If, following Rogoff, university is characterised by action rather than institution or place, it is clear that in practising the university we do so beyond the physical boundaries of its buildings. To practise the university as interstitial, translocational and discursive enables us to begin to see that the University of the Highlands and Islands could exemplify the positive diaspora of the Collège Internationale de Philosophie. After all, it is a university which is in many places at once, a generative matrix which may be more appropriately described as a transversity, which produces what Leitch (1986, p. 103) describes in the context of the International College as the “terrain of the inter”.

This has clear implications for the “material conditions of teaching practice” when the “scene of instruction” (Norris, 1988, p. 25) is played out in the between space of digital technology. Distance delivery of studio education entails a need to reconsider existing, therefore to an extent normative, teaching practices. It becomes important to ask: Can we consider our
The walls of the Free University are porous because it's a domestic space as well. People are coming to a different form of institution where perhaps the experience of learning and discussing is as valuable as the subject-matter of what is discussed...So there's not only this porosity, a leakage between being in the university and outside the university but from that...an experiential knowledge becomes possible...the imaginative expectations of what people are going to experience here, are different from the normalising academy (Berry et al., 2002)
ways of imagining self within the social media space. That is, does distributing creative practice education through social media bring a new imaginary to the fore which inflects the students’ practice with different possibilities? Upon thinking about this in relation to what Howard Slater writes about the relationship between the leaky university and the imaginative expectations of its participants (Berry et al., 2002), I begin to realise that it is the use of technology as an enabler in distributed studio learning that facilitates the generation of different imaginative expectation(s) for the student. The distributed studio – an electronically enabled taskspace rather than specific place – can facilitate a different kind of experience to the so called normalising academy. In terms of my own imaginative expectation: an institution which allows itself to leak beyond its existing structures could be an institution which places an emphasis on, in the words of Jacob Jakobsen, “the exchange between people” to create a “sort of social situation that is the university” (Berry et al., 2002). A university in which we can explore “the relationship between knowledge and life.” (Berry et al., 2002)

Taking the networked model of the University of the Highlands and Islands, the transversity as I’ve called it, and redistributing this beyond institutional boundaries could offer a model of university truly enmeshed in the communities to which it belongs. An institution which begins to deliver what Clementine Deliss describes as an “architectonics of mobility” which is “roaming, prelusive, permeable” (Deliss, 2009, p. 126). However, mobilising the radically leaky university will undoubtedly present challenges as well as opportunities, and future research will seek to investigate these tensions in greater depth. If we are to fully explore the relationship between knowledge and life, the constituencies which interface with the permeable institution will offer valuable insights which may bring us closer to understanding this exchange. Finally, to revisit the question posed at the very outset of this paper: Where on earth is the University of the Highlands and Islands? I propose that we should ask instead how do we practise the University of the Highlands and Islands? And in answer would conjecture: as a series of concurrent conversations.

**Biography**

Gina Wall is a practising photographer with an interest in photography, writing and difference. Her current research is concerned with landscape photography and spectrality, interdisciplinary practice and the pedagogy of studio learning. Her teaching responsibilities include Photography, Theory and Practice, Research Methods, Honours Dissertation and PhD supervision. Gina is involved in a number of research networks and acts as Convenor for Between Places, a Visual Art Research group led by the University of the Highlands and Islands. In addition, she is responsible for curriculum management at Moray School of Art, part of the University of the Highlands and Islands which is Scotland’s youngest university.

Contact details:
Dr Gina Wall
Curriculum Leader
Moray School of Art
University of the Highlands and Islands
Moray Street
Elgin
IV3 0 1JJ

[ginawall.moray@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:ginawall.moray@uhi.ac.uk)

01343 576413

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