# Future Thinking: Imaginative Expectations for the Leaky University

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## 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 *trans*versity – 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 architechtonics of power at play in the traditional university and to embrace the idea of the *leaky* insitution 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'

> *whose meaning extends – through a more than fortuitous pun – to the classrooms, the buildings and the whole institutional environment within which those disciplines find their appropriate place.*
>
> (Norris, 1988, p. 25)

My concern here is not, following Derrida, to deconstruct the academic structures of the university *per 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 outline 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 outwith 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 *trans*versity, 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 exisiting, therefore to an extent normative, teaching practices. It becomes important to ask: Can we consider our

studios, and other spaces for learning, outside of the context of what has been described as the "normalising academy" (Berry et al., 2002)? And in what way does this shape the forms of community that we build in the collaborative construction of knowledge? Although instruction forms a key part of what we do, i.e. technical demonstration, the scene of instruction becomes a difficult question for the distance learner in fine art. Firstly, the opportunities for traditional demonstration and instruction are few, and secondly, the physical scene of instruction – or the place in which this occurs – is quite different. Rather than this primarily taking place in the traditional studio, the workshop, or the classroom, for our distance learners the scene of instruction is the telephone, Skype and Web 2.0 technology. When learning is facilitated in traditionally arranged or located teaching spaces the conversation between the teaching practitioner and student is always already normatively socialised. This relationship is often informed by the hierarchies of expected social norms and roles, e.g. teacher/student, learned/learner, with all the risks of the learner becoming the object of the learning, e.g. slippage into the mode of being taught. However, based upon my own experiences of working with distance learning students in various communicative scenarios, the obvious lack of an architectonics of power in which the learning takes place impacts significantly upon the nature and quality of the interactions with the student. Although there is undoubtedly still a social power at play, somehow the hierarchical relationship between the learner and teacher is flattened, the conversation itself is foregrounded, and the learning is resituated. The virtual studio becomes less of a locus and more of a task.

The teaching space (part real, part virtual, part imagined) becomes a productive between-ness which is travelled by means of technology – vibrations humming along in an interstitial space. In this regard, learning and teaching do not happen in place but between places, in the textured learning space facilitated by technology. The walls of the studio are rendered porous, revealing a variable texture composed of the changing network of relations between the constituent members of the community of learning. The way in which this institutional porosity impacts upon the learner/learning is summarised by one of the participants involved in the self-institution of the Copenhagen Free University as follows:

> 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)

This notion of the spillage across boundaries of domestic and institutional space is something which resonates quite strongly with me having undertaken studio visits to distance learners' spaces which are often strictly outside of the University (normatively considered). There is a productive tension here in the leakage between the safety of the domestic environment and the university as a discursively mobilised social space. The productivity of this porosity is demonstrated by the fact that undertaking the fine art degree through distance learning situates the learning in a real world environment. This means that students become adept at finding places to work, they develop their own personal and professional networks, and locate, sometimes unorthodox, places to exhibit.

We can therefore begin to think about the question of the *locus* of the studio in terms of an interstitial space which is textured or differenced by dialogue. Thinking of the space between as dialogical in the strongest of senses means that we can consider each learner as a becoming self, made in dialogue with co-members of the learning community. For the student, the becoming self is a constant mode of being: the learner performing themselves in relation to others. Indeed, Nicholas Davey writes of the dialogical subject that: "the subject of converse and negotiation is also the subject at risk…the subject whose being is always at issue because of its immersion in the dialogical exchange" (Davey, 2003, p. 63).

So this *inter* which is constantly woven in the social media space is the dialogical exchange in action. The locus of learning becomes a conversation in which the teaching practitioner does not occupy a special place other than their role as one of the community members. The social media space is a learning site/non-site which is constituted by the dialogical relationships between participants.

In conclusion, the distributed institution offers the potential to explore the productive leakage across the traditional boundaries of the university: its academic structures, institutional and extra-institutional spaces, and its faculties and disciplines. Practising the university as a series of intersections and interstitial spaces, a translocational movement across boundaries, shakes and disorders old paradigms: "the stress on the *inter* signifies at once the breakdown of an old order and syntax of things *and* new linkages and connections made possible as a consequence" (Leitch, 1986, p. 103). The distribution and reach of the University of the Highlands and Islands offers a unique opportunity to rewrite institutional syntax in order to make these new connectivities a possibility. I believe that one of the critical connectivities facilitated by the leaky university is the sociopolitical interface between knowledge and life, which I intend to be the focus of future research.

On the horizon, I see a number of future openings for this work, which takes into consideration the *material conditions of teaching practice* in a distributed university. I fully recognise the generative possibilities of the subject (both the individual and the discipline) placed 'at risk' in the dialogical encounter (Wall, 2012), but I also wonder how can we maximise the possibilities for our learners' enactment of becoming in the conversational spaces within and outwith the institution? In short, how do we mobilise the radically leaky university? In addition, if we flip the question to interrogate the material conditions of *learning*, the consideration of a technological imaginary begins to bubble to the surface. This relates to both the facilitation of creative practice at a distance and the extent to which technology engenders new ways of becoming, alternate

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 taskscape 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.

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