

Walking Conversations: re-imagining learning as ‘creative bravery’ through the Digni University

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The call to reflect on re-imagining learning in a time of crisis for this HDHS workshop got me thinking about the very idea of the university, not only to understand the issues and process involved in the ‘slow death of the university’ (Eagleton 2015) in current times, but that we might also challenge and seek to make change in the interests of what Terry Eagleton calls (2015) the ‘human values and principles’ at the centre of what the university is and ‘what goes on in universities’.

This point is made (almost a decade later) in a different way by the President of Ireland (a sociologist) in a recent speech at Fordham University in New York. President Higgins states that

‘Academics all over the world should weep for the destruction of the concept of the university that has occurred in so many places, which has led to little less than the degradation of learning’.

He goes on to reflect upon the role of public intellectuals:

I believe public intellectuals have an ethical obligation...to take a stand against the increasingly aggressive orthodoxies and discourse of the marketplace that have permeated all aspects of life, including within academia. Is it not as important to experience the development of the self with others and one’s connection and theirs to a shared citizenship and history as it is to become a useful, individualised consuming unit in a consuming culture? Universities, after all, function within a culture, and how they negotiate that relationship, these balances, defines their ethos and output, and it is how they should be judged. The role of academics, and particularly those involved in the public sphere, it could be argued, is to seize moments and have the courage to provide reaction, to be subversive of received thought assumptions and fallacies. (President Michael D Higgins 2019)

A commitment to the university as a public good, as a space for critical thinking , knowledge making and creativity, indeed, the very idea of the university as a common good underpins my personal and politics commitment to the purpose of the university and my role in it - a career in academia (that now spans 32 years)¹.

In recent work (O’Neill 2014, 2021), I argued that as sociologists and critical theorists we need to address the pace of change and acceleration in the contemporary neo-liberal, marketized university by thinking dialectally about *slow* (tempo) as a metaphor for the creation of a radical space that has potential for disrupting accelerated academy. That we

¹ The first in my family to go to University, a working class background, my Dad was a steelworker and then a miner and in both workplaces a trade union leader.

might do this by reflecting on the personal, political, structural and economic rationalities of accelerated academia, and indeed the future of the university, to resist, challenge and seek change. By this, I meant that we must prioritise the university as a centre for 'dialogical learning, critical inquiry, and creative exploration ... and human flourishing' (Zuidervaart, 2011, n.p.).

But more than this, 'the university as a place of imagination, creativity, democratisation and praxis (purposeful knowledge) is important for academics, students and societal well-being'. (O'Neill 2014, np).

In examining possibilities for being slowly radical I argued that the contemporary university is not able, under the terms of current conditions to contain anxiety in a way that is productive to well-being. This connects with Filip Vostal's (2014, n.p.) call for 'unhasty' time as 'an explicit political demand and ethical principle' and his point that there is a vital need for intellectuals and scholars to *reflect* upon their own practices, which are often symptomatic and reproduce the very phenomena they so vividly criticise. We might call the latter processes and practices a kind of 'malignant normality' (Nicholson 2018, Lifton 2017).

A book by Taptiklis (2008) called 'Unmanaging' is helpful to this project. The basis of his argument and the book is that the 'spread of managerial thinking throughout the public as well as private sector' are very influential and should not be taken as the norm. In 1994 he undertook research on the life course of 1,700 New Zealanders, the insurance company he worked for was running into trouble and he wanted to better understand -this was the turning point for him. "I suddenly saw my work in a life insurance mutual in a new perspective... (2008:70). He understood lives as trajectories, that there is a 'felt sense of direction and movement' (p69) and people talk about their lives in terms of 'life events' (p69). 'Unmanaging' for Taptiklis (2008) means that we both we need to explore lived experience from the bottom up (*for me this would mean engaging creatively with people and organisations using participatory, biographical and creative methods*); and we need to 'free ourselves from the ever thickening undergrowth of current management doctrine' (Taptiklis 2008:4).

By 'unmanaging' I mean, following Taptiklis creating space for dialogue, a radical democratic imaginary (Mouffe 1992, Smith 1998, Cornell 1995) to work with and through issues, experiences, (career) biographies, narratives and anxieties. But also by being 'creatively brave'² in our work, collaborations, knowledge production, sharing, listening and learning. The Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies global movement evidences this so very clearly.

By working with and through the World Dignity University.

Education provides the most promising path toward building "a global culture of cooperation," a culture that advances the principles of mutual respect, equality in dignity, unity and diversity, and environmental stewardship, the progenitors of lasting peace.

² Karen Lawson and Jerry O'Neill invited me to speak with them on the walking classroom at the Creative Bravery Festival in Scotland September 2020. I love the concept of Creative Bravery. <https://creativebraveryfestival.com>

I want to share two examples of ‘creative bravery’ in knowledge making and learning as exemplars of the ‘human values and principles’ at the centre of what the university is and ‘what goes on in universities’ and that also connect with the World Dignity University Strategic Plan.

The examples are underpinned by Illich’s concept of conviviality. Illich (2001) defines a convivial society as one where people are not slaves to tools, technology or oppressive governance systems, and where creativity and imagination are the lifeblood of society. Focusing his critique on the deadening of the imagination through a focus on productivity, acceleration, and the engineering of satisfaction and consent as a threat to society, he offers tools for a convivial society, based upon what we would define as a commitment to participatory, relational methods and the relational goods of research (see Berg and Nowicka (2020) Phoenix (2020) Kaptani et al 2020). Convivial teaching, learning and research highlights interdependence, the relational, embodied, sensory and affective aspects of research, and is about creativity and the imagination. The relational, active listening and convivial tools that we place at the centre of the research examples here are, always participatory.

1. **Participation Arts and Social Action in Research (PASAR).** Theatre Making and Walking in research with migrant women (Umut Erel, Ereni Kaptani, Tracey Reynolds and Maggie O’Neill)

<https://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>

A short film by Marcia Chandra that shares the work and importantly the process.
<https://vimeo.com/298881890>

2. **Walking Conversations**

Maggie O’Neill, Arpad Szakalocjai, Ger Mullally, the Dingle Creativity and Innovation Hub and students and teachers from the Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne.

Walking is a mundane activity but also fundamental to our way of being and sociality, taking a walk with someone is a powerful way of communicating about experience, we can become attuned and connected in a lived embodied way with the feelings and lived experience of another. Pioneering Anthropologist Tim Ingold talks about walking as the ‘art of paying attention’. Walking opens a space for dialogue, and embodied knowledge and experience can be shared, it is ‘convivial’ in the senses described above.

This short film by Jan Haaken and Maciej Klich shares this work in progress and in process on walking conversations and the walking classroom.

<https://vimeo.com/397645710>