



Losing, and finding, spaces to learn in the university



Helen Varney^a, Theresa Van Lith^b, Elvie Jean Rumbold^c, Deborah Morris^{a,*},
Suzanne Marion Fegan^d, Beth Rankin^e, Ro O'Bryen Horsford^c, Janine Brophy-Dixon^f

^a Palliative Care Unit, School of Public Health and Human Biosciences, La Trobe University, 215 Franklin St, Melbourne, Victoria 3000, Australia

^b Department of Counselling and Psychological Health, School of Public Health and Human Bioscience, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086, Australia

^c Department of Public Health, School of Public Health and Human Biosciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086, Australia

^d Academic Language and Learning Unit, Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086, Australia

^e School of Education, Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia

^f Department of Public Health, School of Public Health and Human Biosciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The issue of healthy environments for learning became a focal point in a peer research group at a university, where a change of physical meeting place galvanized a discussion about losing and finding spaces in which to know and learn. This paper presents a 'postcard' conversation exploring in presentational forms our experiences of these places as students and scholars. We present this as an example of an arts-based methodology giving rise to themes of neglected ways of knowing and learning, and the yearning for spaces for creativity and collaboration. We offer representations of and reflections on experience in order to further discussion about what it means for universities to be healthy settings for students and staff in the age of academic entrepreneurship.

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In the first issue of *Emotion, Space and Society* the editors expressed a commitment to including 'imaginative endeavors traditionally marginalized from mainstream academic circles' (Davidson et al., 2008: 2). In a later issue Kenway and Youdell (2011) asked what methods might let us represent the emotion that is immaterial and yet embodied and expressed. So when the call for papers for this issue invited us to evoke as well as analyze our experiences of academic spaces – the physical, discursive and emotional spaces we inhabit as students and scholars – it drew a lively response from eight members of our peer research group. We saw this as a chance to develop an arts-based methodological contribution on the topic.

This article began as a kind of postcard conversation (Allen and Rumbold, 2004), as we used images and narrative to represent our experiences of learning within our academic institution.

We wanted to use ways of knowing often neglected in academia, or dismissed as descriptive and impressionistic, to explore emotion and our relationships to spaces (Kenway and Youdell, 2011). Presentational knowing, where experiential knowing is symbolized in art forms (Heron and Reason, 1997), is central to this article, rather than the propositional knowing dominant in most scholarly work. The presentational knowing here takes the form of 'postcards' of short reflections or images representing our responses to the spaces – physical, relational, epistemological – in which we learn in this university. We call them 'postcards' though they do not perfectly fit that form, because they capture fragments of experience and embody relationships between people.

Since we offer this inquiry as a methodological contribution, we should be explicit about our method of inquiry here. The writers belong to a research group open to anyone interested, meeting monthly in a university café to talk about our research projects (Neville, 2008 gives an account of the group that inspired this one). The call for papers was circulated to us as a group, and eight of us who are academic staff and/or postgraduate students took up the challenge to reflect on what happens to our knowing when we enter academic spaces. We encouraged each other to express our experiences of learning in these spaces as images and/or vignettes

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 (0) 448 887 361; fax: +61 3 9285 5111.

E-mail addresses: H.Varney@latrobe.edu.au (H. Varney), tjanlith@students.latrobe.edu.au (T. Van Lith), j.rumbold@latrobe.edu.au (E.J. Rumbold), D.Morris@latrobe.edu.au (D. Morris), s.fegan@latrobe.edu.au (S.M. Fegan), beth.rankin@acu.edu.au (B. Rankin), R.Horsford@latrobe.edu.au (R. O'Bryen Horsford), Brophydixon@me.com (J. Brophy-Dixon).

or short narratives, understanding arts-based methods to include all the arts forms, but for practical reasons restricting ourselves to literary and visual arts. We gave no direction about whether the focus should be on the physical, discursive or emotional spaces. Some of us began with images, others ended there, and four stayed with writing. One opted for an image without additional text. As each postcard was created, it was sent electronically to everyone in the group.

Once the collection of postcards was complete, we met to move our inquiry from experiential and presentational knowing toward propositional and practical knowing (Heron and Reason, 1997). We drew on Heron and Reason's participatory paradigm (Heron and Reason, 1997) as we worked together to identify and discuss the themes we saw emerging from this set of representations, seeking both the strongest themes and the contrapuntal voices (Gilligan et al., 2006). Since we are located in the fields of education and public health, we turned particularly to theories from these disciplines to frame and understand our experiences. Wanting practical outcomes from our inquiry, we also reflected on what the arts-based methodology has provided as a way to access, represent and understand our experiences.

Offering an account of this inquiry as a methodological contribution, we have included the 'postcards' in full to allow the reader/viewer to understand whatever these presentational forms evoke (Seeley and Reason, 2008). Helen, Theresa and Jean wrote up the discussion of themes in the light of the relevant literature, and maintained the spirit of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) by offering each draft to the group for discussion. Our aim has been to preserve the diversity of these experiences by presenting them as a small collection of images and stories allowed to speak for themselves, framed by a discussion that is brief and open-ended.

1. Postcards from the ruins

1.1. Postcard 1. streamlining scholarly spaces



With designer sleek and clinically sterile physical spaces, staff locked away behind security doors, crowded classes and timetables, competitive assessment, rising fees, multiplying bureaucratic tasks, and meetings focused on functional imperatives, the university these days does not seem to offer hurried students and hassled academics many spaces for conversation about ideas. When I first came to this university nearly forty years ago, doors were

open onto book lined studies where people talked, and the wider corridors in the older buildings became liminal spaces where conversations occurred (Hurdley, 2010). Perhaps the lawns in good weather still serve this purpose, or our new Writer's Block café in the library?

But I fear that the business-like ethos of staff meetings is infiltrating postgraduate subcultures. I would love to see the university fostering doubt, and helping people stay with not knowing until new knowing emerges, perhaps even new ways of knowing (Heron and Reason, 1997). Instead I suspect we ask people to jump to clarity, to achieve, to function, to present with confidence and authority. I want to ask about those things you cannot find a place for here, and I also want to turn the question around and ask where, in the university and in academia, you do find spaces for emotion, for imagination, and for more of your experiencing? Where do you find encouragement to embark on different forms of research?

Jean

1.2. Postcard 2. three spaces

Room 115. A ground floor room, out-of-the-way, stuck in a corner with a view of gum trees and a car park. It's kept locked between meetings and, once admitted, you must keep the door shut to protect nearby offices from any noise. It has a faint but lingering chemical smell. There's nothing quirky or appealing about this room, but for years it was our refuge, our space of exploration and exposure, the place where we played with alternatives to the metaphor of 'thesis as solitary ordeal'. Despite our mixed feelings about Room 115, we called ourselves by its name: Seminar 115.

The Agora. A short walk from 115 takes you to a different world, a bustling messy quadrangle that's infused with scents of food and coffee. Each corner is marked by a mature plane tree and in the center is a circle of grass. On three sides, cafés mingle with banks, a travel agency, a bookshop. On the fourth side is the library, recently renovated to present a glassy face to the world.

The Writer's Block Café. Just within the entrance to the library sits another café. Turning in through a wide doorway, you look past the counter to a floor-to-ceiling window offering a view of the Agora. This café is a unique space, not-quite-Agora, not-quite-library. It's a place where hierarchies flatten, lecturers and students and visitors mingle. And it's where we meet now, driven away from 115 by that unhealthy odor. We've become the Writer's Block group. We rub

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