The Public, Practice of Hope, and the Role of the Academic

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Abstract

We consider how the public is constructed and what it means to make this work public for debate and dialogue in teaching practices. If we think of the public as a constructed space of movement where a group gathers for a common purpose, what does that mean for teaching in both early childhood and higher education? We draw on the practice of hope framework to think about the role of the academic, research, and the connection with the public. The Out and About research project, located in urban and regional Australia makes visible how academics connect research with the public and generates further considerations of what the public can be including--a public constructed by humans, place, and more-than-human communities. Out and About situates the practice of hope as always becoming towards an awareness of what is limiting and unjust, how change and transformation is imagined, and how being public provokes action. The practice of hope drives how we act as academics and creates a space for academics to connect with the public to activate environmental justice.

Keywords: public, practice of hope, Place, Indigenous worldviews, environmental justice, higher education, early childhood education

Acknowledgement of Country

The research shared in this article was generated with Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri-Woi Wurrung Country. We pay respect to Ancestors, Elders and Families and the deep knowledges embedded within First Nations communities and the ongoing connection of, and care for Country. We also acknowledge that connections with place provoke learning as we learn with, and care for Sky Country, the Waterways and the Land.

Introduction

Clouds are across Sky on this cool morning with Wadawurrung Country. Ebbing waves meet my feet as I lean over and scoop up water in the bucket. Feet move too slowly and my shoes soak in Ocean as I straighten up, a full bucket in my hands. Ocean is part of the smoking ceremony and Welcome to Country, led by the local Wadawurrung educator. These moments with Country, local Indigenous knowledges start the Public Out and About Day where children, teachers, families, and community members meet and walk with local Place. Local Place, in this gathering of the public include histories, stories, Ocean, Cliff, Sand, Seaweed, Crab, Shell, Rocks, and on this day, Rain and Rainbow. Free to everyone, Public Out and About Day brings together a public for building a deep relationship between humans and the planet – a relationship that will hopefully provoke climate action.

This short place story pays attention to engaging in and with the public, as an "expression of that experience" (Van Dooren & Rose, 2016, p. 93). The use of the

word Public and the purpose of the public emerges as an important consideration in relation to research that works towards the common good.

What is the public?

The *public* as a constructed space of movement where groups gather and act for a common purpose situates the public to respond to current issues and community needs. This construction of the public builds on Dewey's (1927) conceptual understanding that the public is created with the presence of a conflict and people come together to find a solution. In this sense, the public does not just exist. Part of this is seeing the possibilities of the public – knowing what is possible and working towards these multiple futures. One way to consider the public is through "public spaces." Public spaces are active places where "a better state of things can be imagined: because it is only through the project of a better social order that we can perceive the gaps in what exists and try to transform and repair (Greene 1986), p. 247-248). Said (1996) takes on the public in terms of the public intellectual—a public intellectual is a person resisting, questioning, disrupting, and rethinking. Engagement, activation, and action construct the public and offer the possibilities of connections within local and global communities—communities that are positioned to act and work towards the public good.

In a statement on art and the public space, Ayers and Dohrn (n.d.) offer the following questions for provocation:

- What does it mean to be human today, trudging into the 21st Century?
- How can we act ethically in our hurried and bewildering world?
- How did we get here, and where do we want to go?
- Is there a Public Space? In fact, is there a Public?
- What is our diagram of the known world, and how might things be otherwise?
- What kind of society do we want to inhabit?
- Who do we want to be as people? As a public?

The questions above provoke an interdisciplinary approach to meaning making with the public. These questions also call for imagination – imagination to engage "the dynamic work of mapping the world as it really is, and then purposely stepping outside and leaning toward a world that could or should be, but is not yet" (Ayers & Dohrn, n.d.). Imagination that evokes being "wide-awake" (Greene, 1995) within the world – aware of what was, is and can be and activating thinking and action that is *"otherwise"* (p. 1). Ayers and Dohrn (n.d.) recognize how present times and histories can leave us without hope echoing Greene's words (1997) of *"dark times"*—times where inequities, violence, and injustices are prevalent. Yet, though Ayers and Dohrn's (n.d.) questions and Greene's (1997) response to "dark times" through the insistence for light and imagining what else can be, position the public as critical to how alternative ways of doing and being in the world can emerge and be enacted.

One example of alternative ways of doing and being is the Educational Project in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Following the end of World War II, a public emerged disrupting and finding an alternative story to the histories of fascism, a story of participatory democracy. Infant-toddler centres and preschools for children ages 0-6 constructed through an engaged public who understood "school as first and foremost a public space and site of ethical and political practice—a place of encounter and connection, interaction and dialogue among citizens, young and older, living together in a "community" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2007, p. 2). This early childhood system, "arguably, the most successful, most extensive and most sustained example of radical or progressive education that has ever been" (Moss, 2016, p. 167) makes visible what is possible through a public that is a constructed space of movement where people come together and act for a common purpose in response to issues and current needs.

And yet, what does all this mean for academics in higher education doing research, teaching, and acting? Drawing on Ayers and Dohrn's (n.d.) questions, we offer the following questions for consideration:

- What does it mean to be human and work as an academic?
- How might academics act ethically within the context of higher education?
- How did higher education get to its current neoliberal state and where do academics go from here?
- Is there a Public Space and Public within higher education?
- How might we imagine ourselves as academics as otherwise?
- What kind of higher education context do we want to inhabit?
- What do we want as academics? And what is our role in and with the public? We turn to the 'practice of hope' (Iorio & Tanabe, 2019) as a way towards engaging with these questions as we consider our work with the public.

The practice of hope

We (Iorio and Tanabe) came to the *"practice of hope"* (Iorio & Tanabe, 2019) through our own confrontation of the fatalistic environment of education, reflective of the dominance of neoliberal thought and practices present throughout education contexts. Neoliberalism, also articulated as free trade, or free market, first appeared in the late 1930s, establishing regulations that ensured the growth of wealth for the wealthy while also dismantling socialism (Monbiot, 2016). Deregulation, commodification, and privatisation are commonplace in a neoliberal context where profit becomes key to democracy (Giroux, 2014). Neoliberalism resituates market as the provocation for action, informing the political, social, and cultural aspects of society (Lemke, 2001) and this includes education.

In higher education, we (Iorio and Tanabe) encountered neoliberal ideals in structures in universities modeled after corporations where competition is at the forefront (Marginson, 2004, 2016; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Money drives the higher education machine with faculty forced to do research focused on the aim of profit (Saunders, 2011). Neoliberalism has situated students as consumers, academics as service providers, and administrators as CEOs, contributing to the university where one can purchase a degree and successful research is about income generated (Haiven, 2014).

The practice of hope is a framework in response to the overwhelming presence of neoliberalism in higher education, "...the practice of hope is our way of not giving into the dull and insidious belief that all has been done and our hands are tied in the neoliberal context of higher education" (Iorio & Tanabe, 2019, p. 20). It gives us a way to rethink the context in higher education. As academics, we (Iorio and Tanabe) wanted to work towards change and the common good, disrupting our constructed work as service providers and finding a new way of doing, being, and acting in higher education. The practice of hope--built on Freire's (1994; 1998) understandings of hope as part of what makes us all human--supports academics to pursue human completeness (Freire, 1998) and engage the ontology of hope (Freire, 1972).

Framing the work of academics through the practice of hope offers a jumping off point for something different, something other than the current neoliberal context of higher education, something other than academics as service providers. In this sense, academics can act in ethical ways as they recognize responsibility for the Other (Moss, 2019), again practicing relationality. Academics practicing hope lead research that contributes to humanity, towards the public good. We offer the following example – Out and About – as an example of acting with hope, with the public, and towards the common good.

Practicing Hope – Out and About Research Project

The Out and About research project began over 6 years ago in urban and regional Victoria, Australia (Hamm & Boucher, 2017; Hamm, 2017, Iorio, Hamm, & Krechevsky, 2020; Iorio & Hamm, 2021; Iorio & Parnell, 2020). Led by Hamm and Iorio, this research project is in response to the lack of connection between humans and the planet evident in the present cataclysmic state of the environment (Solomon, Plattner, Knutti, & Friedlingstein, 2009). Out and About is situated within a relational framework "common worlds" (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2016; Taylor & Guigini, 2012; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015), making visible the innovative practices teachers use to support children in learning and building relationships within their *common worlds*. This includes more-than-human relationships--Plants, Sky, Waterways, Insects, Animals, Trees, Cliffs, Sand--as well as the histories, stories, and politics of the local place. Specific for this context is Australia's colonial past, present, and futures as the research is geo-historically located. Central to this is place, place as not "culturally or politically neutral" (Mignolo, 2003 in Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy, 2014, p. 14) but place as a "territory that is Indigenous and which has been and continues to be subject to the forces of colonisation" (p. 14). Drawing from this understanding of place and within a relational framework, creates the conditions to attend to the multiple entanglements – ethical, political, historical – present through the process of building relationships that activate innovative practices that respond to climate emergencies.

We (Hamm and Iorio) have named this as *"learning with place"* (Iorio & Hamm, 2021). *Learning with place* situates teaching and learning with connected relations between the complexity of social and historical contexts and the image of children, families, and communities as capable and contributing to the well-being of communities. *Learning with Place* includes Martin's (2016) concept of "coming alongside" as a way for non-Indigenous people to think, act, and listen with Indigenous Worldviews in respectful ways.

While "coming alongside" is focused on Indigenous Worldviews, the practice suggests a way for us to work in multiple contexts, communities, and countries in respectful ways especially as white women. "Coming alongside" is how we can recognise and de-center our own colonial inheritances and understandings as we work ethically in multiple places. Further, *Learning with Place* recognises the entanglement between children, families, communities, and places, seeing place as agentic and relational. *Learning with Place* creates a space for knowledges to emerge – knowledges that are deeply situated in the web of relationships commonplace learning and teaching experiences.

Going Out and About

Specifically, Out and About includes teachers and children walking with local places, for example, Creek and Beach, once a week or fortnight, visiting the same places over an extended period of time. During these visits, teachers and children practice *learning with place* -- walking *with,* listening *with,* thinking *with*--the local places and the more-than-human communities that inhabit them. This is reflective of the "*contact zone"* (Haraway, 2008) -- the site of place as including human and more-than-human entities – and activates "place-making" (Pink, 2008, p. 178). "Place-making" supports teachers, children, and researchers to participate *with place* and recognise "place as a pedagogical contact zone" (Hamm & Boucher, 2017). Data is then generated through the ordinary moments that children, teachers, and researchers spend with local place and the more-than-human. In particular, the use of multisensory methods (Pink, 2008) offers ways to pay attention to the multiple relations with and between humans, place, and the more-than-human.

Ongoing analysis happens as we think *with* the data, rather than mine and take from the data (Iorio & Parnell, 2020). "Tracing" and "assembling" (Latour, 2005) are practiced as we attend to moments and the unexpected and unpredictable in the stories and events that emerge as we think with no preconceived lists of themes or expectations of the data. Relations, linkages, unions, remembrances, connections are

traced and made visible as we consider and reconsider the data in new and unanticipated ways.

"Place-making" (Pink, 2008), "place as a pedagogical contact zone" (Hamm & Boucher, 2017), "tracing" (Latour, 2005) and "assembling" (Latour, 2005)… call for methodologies that make public and create a public, engaging with complexity of relationships and place. Drawing on the practice of pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg, et al., 2007; Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998; Parnell, 2011; Rinaldi, 2006) and "ethography" (Van Dooren & Rose, 2016), rich, detailed, and entangled stories emerge, making public place, more-than-human others, and the co-participation of children, teachers, and educators with each other, place, and the more-than-human.

Pedagogical documentation

Beginning in the infant-toddler and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, pedagogical documentation makes learning visible (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001) to the public for debate and dialogue (Rinaldi, 2006). Teachers listening with and co-participating during ordinary moments in the daily life of the classroom is part of pedagogical documentation process. Documenting (for example, photos--not of children but the actions--hands moving), video (non-identifiable), artefacts, notes) much like you would collect moments in a photo album or receipts from trip occurs with the listening and co-participation. Yet, it is more than recording and engaging with interpretation. The actions of documenting and the related active listening 'placehold' (Wien, 2013) these ordinary moments as means for revisiting and meaning-making inclusive of consideration and analysis of children's and teachers' viewpoints. Co-participation through this process is relevant and significance as artefacts, theories, questions, assumptions, and new knowledges come together and then are made public in a physical panel. Displayed publicly for further conversation and debate, the panel offers provocations for broadening initial ideas and generating further knowledges and perspectives. Pedagogical documentation works to generate data and engage analysis through a complex process of co-participation between children, teachers, and communities. Regarding Out and About, pedagogical documentations provide practices to make visible relations with place and the more-than-human through living documents that pay attention to multiple entanglements present in local places. As a way to attend closely to more than human others, our documentation practices include storying relational encounters between humans and more-than-human others. Our storying practices are underpinned by an approach that Van Dooran and Rose (2016) name as "*ethography*".

Ethography

Van Dooren and Rose (2016) see ethography as an approach grounded in an attentiveness to the evolving ways of life (or *ēthea*; singular: *ethos*) including diverse forms of human and nonhuman life. Ethographies are not meant to be "objective" accounts. Rather, ethographies are "storytelling as an ethical practice" and are created through the "dynamic act of storying" (p. 93). This process includes "both attention to others and expression of that experience: to stand *as* witness and actively to *bear* witness" (p. 93). An ethographic approach understands the public as the constructed space of movement and "tends to start with, to be provoked by, other-than-human ways of life, the openness of these accounts inevitably draws humans into the frame" (Van Dooran & Rose, 2016, p. 86). This approach generates noticing practices that are not foregrounded with the human perspective, rather more-than-human communities are the focus of provocations. This approach is markedly different from an ethnographic approach, which begins with the human experience.

Practicing ethography witnesses the complexity of relationships present in parenting and learning, as well as the social and historical perspectives that are part of each context and country. Ethography empowers researchers to turn towards the ordinary

moments, to listen *with* children, teachers, more-than-human, and place and enact research in a way that is responsive in multiple and responsible manners.

Pedagogical Documentation and Ethography

Bringing together the practices of pedagogical documentation and ethography, we are actively engaging in creating "Place stories" (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; Land, Hamm, Yazbek, Brown, Danis, & Nelson, 2020; Hamm, 2017) that engage with the multiple layers and entanglements that are always present when we view place and the more-than-human including social and historical contexts as well as situated within relationships. Place stories work to "re-story places through orientations that disrupt settler colonial imaginaries…looking beyond innocent perspectives of children's place experiences and orienting toward explicitly politicized enactments of and dialogues with place" (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 103). These stories are "active sites for the ongoing weaving or braiding of stories, efforts to inhabit multiply storied worlds in a spirit of openness and accountability to otherness" (Van Dooren & Rose, 2016, p. 85). Place stories focus on foregrounding Indigenous perspectives of place, rather than beginning with the colonial gaze (Said, 1996). This is an intentional, active process to disrupt and rethink the ways in which relations with place are understood.

Place story: Public Out and About Day

Wind whips hair and Rain splashes faces as adult and child bodies are moved by Sand towards Cliffs. Child bodies, unconcerned with cold Wind and Water, become entangled with Waves as they crash onto Sand. The entanglement of Wind and Rain with human bodies generates energy and excitement as we walk with Beach. As we walk, we are called into connection with Rockpool, Crab, Driftwood, Shell as we pay attention to Cliff in the distance. Looking towards Cliff, we wonder with the entanglements of Cliff with Wind, Waves, Rain and Sand. We wonder about Wadawurrung people noticing the movement of Cliff over many centuries. Later, as we return to the other end of the Beach, we sit with cold Sand and take a few quiet moments to be with Beach. Bodies and minds are stilled.

Booklets grasped in hands of the public, the public participating with Fishermans Beach on this rainy day walk with the practices of Out and About shared by the children and teachers who have a deep relationship with this place. Many visits and

experiences are made visible in the detailed drawings and descriptions of acting and doing in this place. Provocations accompany practices – provocations to generate more practices. Feet move with Grass, to Sand, with Sand, stepping between white Water, where Sand and Water meet. Hands open the booklet as fingers trace the practice and provocation.

Provocation:

Who are the traditional custodians of the land where the place is located?

What is the history of the place?

How do you story a place that has already been storied?

Look at the cliffs to see what colours they have and be inspired by them.

Hands flip through the booklet and then turn the book over. While the one part of the booklet focuses on listening with, walking with, thinking with Fishermans Beach, the booklet is more than that. Practices and provocations are presented by the children and teachers that expand this work beyond the local context and make connections to places the public may visit during other times and moments of their lives.

Provocation:

What calls you into connection in the place?

How do you make a connection with the place and the more-than-human?

Does this place connect to another place?
How do you describe this connection?

The end of Public Out and About Day focuses on making the practices generated in the Out and About project more public for consideration, debate, and dialogue with the local community and visitors to this place. Situated on a fence next to the path to the beach, six panels share the purpose of Out and About, the practices used to build relations with place and the more-than-human, and act as a provocation for the public to commit to going out and about to further common climate futures. Hands tie each panel as rain beads on the surface, adding another dimension to the words, photos, and actions of the children and teachers thinking with Fishermans Beach.

Expanding, rethinking, and the public

Gathering the public with the common purpose of environmental justice changes how we think about research as academics. When we practice hope, our actions change

See the beauty in the environment.
You need to use your senses.
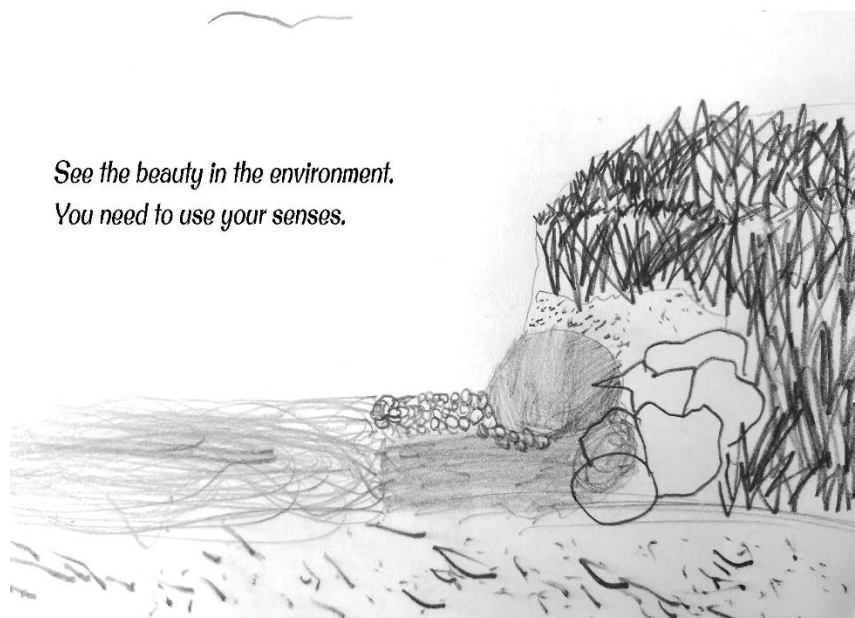
and our role as academic is re-imagined as activist, activating hope, engaging

effectuated hope. As the learning begins with teachers, children, and researchers as they build deep relationships with place and the more-than-human, the moving of the research to engage with the public disrupts the conception that research lives only in higher education and with those that can do research. Rather, research connected with and for the public changes the context of higher education and creates access for everyone within a community, or the public. In Out and About, the public is seen as contributing in a way that is reflective of their own experiences, histories, and stories. This repositioning of research situated as part of the public, rethinks who can be a researcher and opens the possibilities of what can be.

Moss (2019) reminds us that an alternative conception is needed, research that "allows for, indeed desires, wonder and surprise, new thinking and new understandings, research that is suffused with a relational ethos, an ethics of care, encounter, and hospitality" (p. xiv). Iorio and Parnell (2020) refer to Moss's (2019) notion of hospitality as offering "notions of reciprocal relationality – a way of thinking with the connective tissues that require movements between our earthly bodies and human bodies – activating encounters with one another and the more-than-human" (p. 311). This is pivotal as we are suggesting that research connected with the public is the first step – and that research continues beyond the moments with the researcher and into the everyday moments of the public and their lives. Resituating research in this manner pushes aside traditional conventions of who a researcher is, what research is, and a blind adherence to evidence. It moves research from the extraordinary and removed, to something the public does, creates, and wonders with. It also offers a challenge to academics and researchers to consider – Can research exist and matter without researchers reviewing and analysing data and reporting findings? Can the public do research without these expected elements of what constructs research?

Expanding the public beyond humans

The Public Out and About Day expands our understanding of public to include Place and more-than-human kin. Returning to Donna Haraway, we center our attention on "living well together and mutual flourishing" (Haraway, 2008, p.207) as activating ethical and political accountabilities. Haraway shares the idea of "environmental justice" as a practice for mutual flourishing and describes it as "nurturing and inventing enduring multispecies—human and nonhuman—kindreds" (Haraway, 2018, p. 102). For the Out and About project, this means thinking with provocations such as, what is required to center Indigenous perspectives of Place (including more-than-human kin) in ways that activate ethical and political response-abilities (Haraway, 2016)? This provocation intentionally works to de-center humans as 'saviours' of planetary crisis and focus on relationality and the interconnection of all "earthly beings" (Haraway, 2008).

Engaging with environmental justice generates different ways to understand the public and to make commitments to learn *with* all the layers of our local places. As we make the commitment to learn with our local places, we make public our intentions to engage with the ongoing complexities and tensions of living and learning on stolen land and the destruction of ecosystems as a result of colonial legacies. We are required to interrogate these legacies and make public the ways that we are entangled within the pasts, presents and futures of our local places. If we consider the conceptions of the public and the public space as shared by Dewey (1927) and Greene (1995) with the understanding of Haraway (2016) and practices of Out and About, a new public can be constructed that includes humans, more-than-human, and place as all share the purpose of living well together.

The public and new ways to think within higher education

Engaging in research that works towards the common good not only changes how we as academics construct research that includes the public, but it also changes the structures within higher education. For example, the connection with the public and

contemporary issues in local and global communities is the impetus for rethinking early childhood teacher education. In Australia, foregrounding Indigenous Worldviews in teacher education programs disrupts dominant Western paradigms informing education and resituates teaching and learning as relational including connections with local communities and concerns. This rethinks the reliance on the dominant narratives like quality, developmentally appropriate practices, and readiness in relations to local knowledges rather than universal, contextless childhoods (Moss, 2019).

In a recently (2020) accredited early childhood teacher education program at the University of Melbourne, the idea of the public, and working towards the common good informs the course outcomes, design and delivery of the program. The program has been created to respond to the local context from a relational perspective. This approach acknowledges that in Australia, all teaching and learning takes place on stolen land. Teaching and learning in this way generates authentic, meaningful connections with place, elevating children in their community as capable which leads to active citizens who can contribute to positive social change" (The University of Melbourne, 2020). Situating teaching and learning in this way, responds to understanding the public as created through contemporary issues and involving human, place, and the more-than-human communities. The program generates an early childhood teacher that actively engages with the ethical and political "response-abilities" (Haraway, 2016) of flourishing together.

Further provocations

As our work generates new ideas and questions, we have come to find the public is something that is an ever expanding and critical part to how we create spaces within higher education and beyond to question and rethink as we work towards the common good. We wonder how you might engage with the practice of hope in your own context and what research might emerge as you consider the public. Further, in what ways might contributing to humanity challenge the limitations in your own context and find new ways to create the higher education we want to inhabit that includes the public as a critical component.

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