

On Voices and Silence

A reflection on a study of isolation and community in two 'phd labs' in the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of NSW.

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“ I will often go a whole day and not talk to anyone at the lab... my English is not so good and I would like to be able to practice speaking it”

First year phd student level 6 lab FBE

“ at the mezzanine lab I have everything I need as a new student... community... support.. and I can speak my own language...”

First year student mezzanine lab FBE

“I only go to the (level 6) lab rarely because I find that it is too noisy and I like to work from home.... people are always talking and I can not concentrate”

Third year phd student level 6 lab FBE

“ the mezzanine lab is a great community however it is not always possible to concentrate on your work and I am thinking of moving to the level 6 lab where you can do more serious thinking”

Second year phd student Mezzanine lab

I awoke this morning to the sound of voices.

The voices came from the students that I had listened to over the past year. People from several continents- from different backgrounds and countries, men and women of diverse ages and life experience. People who were extraverted and introverted (and sometimes both), people who were isolated and lonely, some obsessive, others alienated and then those who were none of these as well. People who were lost and found on the thesis path, and those who had sat silently, just feet from my own cubicle, and who without me knowing at the time, left for other paths through life.

These people all shared two things in common; they were members of the human race, and they also shared the long, glorious, painful, isolating pathway that the phd student takes toward receiving the credential of doctorate. The path that will make them discover the boundaries and limitations of their newfound knowledge, and in some cases the limits of their own endurance. The marathon runners of the academic track and field, they may never do this again even if they become academics. They truly learn the meaning of ‘the loneliness of the long distance runner’.

Even after this journey is done, their work may be only read by a handful of people, and they may never return to the topic of their journey, nor be recognized for the work on this pilgrimage. Spending three or four years in this endeavour with your voice being only faintly heard, is an exercise which relies on belief, passion and endurance whilst all else can often fall away. Take it from me, I know, because I am one of them.

Yet it was the voices of these very people who woke me in the quiet of this summer morning, before the sun had risen on a small cottage that was my home. All was dark and their sounds which were gentle and angry, warm and musical cut through the night and silence like a knife, and called me at first to remember a moment which was the start of it all, a moment in my own journey on the same path as theirs. A moment in fact of my own anger over a voice that in this case lay silent in my hand, in the form of a paper note which I sat and stared at in bewilderment.

That note however and its author, who was to become one of my greatest friends in the ensuing story that the note in effect created, was to set the scene for a journey of discovery into the world of these ‘phd people’ who came from several continents, and who by some strange contrivance, sat side by side working on the same path, and yet in many cases knew nothing of each other.

The note, which in the politest terms suggested that I be quieter, was anonymous, and at first in my mind was the source of great anger, but with time and as I have learned in life over many years, was not all that it seemed. In fact this theme ‘nothing is as it seems’ was to become a constant mantra in my own discovery of the nature, beauty, complexity and strangeness of this community, as well as a larger community (here called for want of better words at first ‘the faculty’) of which it was a subset. ‘The faculty’ in itself became an ‘accidental study’ which was inescapably revealed also, due to its intrinsic connection with the phd community.

Whilst the little note implored silence, it was to become the beacon for a new movement if you like, that was generated into not only the study of this community, but in the process, the gradual revelation and potential change of its nature, behaviour and its place in the broader faculty community. A little note (and voice) calling for silence ironically ‘cut through the silence’, which was at that time the prevalent and oppressive ambient of the phd lab that I sat in.

But let me not get too far ahead here, for these are becoming grand claims that almost herald a rebellion of sorts. The truth in fact was far from that, and was more in the realms of revelation of the complexity of people and their needs, and how two separate phd communities operated with virtually the same make up of people, (by gender and background) and yet manifested in the two most diverse community settings. One if you like a ‘social interactive community’ and the other a ‘silent community’.

And in the revelation of these two differences also, came the revealing of a ‘paradox of appearances’, since both communities operated based on a similar principle, that of an apparent ‘dominant culture’ prevailing over the community, leading in both to coherence and conformity, and yet also alienation of those who did not fit in. Within this phenomenon also lay the potential identification of what one could call ‘catalyst elements’, in the form of situations and particular personality types, who fostered or perpetuated these community states.

Sitting silently in the background of all of this and these two communities, lay the vast and silent building called the Red Centre which was in my mind in the earlier stages of discovery, to appear like a ‘dead centre’, spasmodically interrupted by the seasonal migration of hundreds of undergraduate students of the built environment, who brought light and colour to the corridors, which often lay desolate in their absence. Holding architectural models, chattering into i-phones, young, loud, beautiful and indolent, they would commandeer the lifts and corridors, and then with the apparent ring of a bell, disappear into the classrooms and lectures of their disciplines.

Behind this scene also lay a silent and apparently serious world, in the form of ‘the faculty’ and its administrators, lecturers, associate professors and professors who sat in individual rooms which lay along a gun-barrel corridor, which was the length of a football field, or so it appeared to one who stood at one end. This corridor of offices was in turn separated physically from the rest of the community of the built environment, by a massive glass partition, punctuated by thick glass security doors, which ran longitudinally through the length of the Red Centre, causing the sense of not only spatial schizophrenia, but the clear and present separation of those in authority, from those who were not.

To add mystery to the paradox of appearances, when I talked to any of the individuals on the ‘other side of the glass’ irrespective of their status or position, each was like all the other people in the building, and in some cases felt alienated by the layout of the building as well.

The two phd communities sat in amongst all this like islands, bounded by their own ‘security glazed frontages’, notifying the rest of the community of the main label of their own particular status- ‘the phd lab’. Despite these similar external labels, behind these gateways lay strangely, completely different worlds.

In the case of the ‘social community’ which lay on the mezzanine level, and I will now call the ‘mezzanine community’, there sat a close knit, warm and social community who shared in life and phd journey, through all the simple things of life, including sharing in morning teas, birthdays and other life event celebrations, and in a way of interaction which had within it rules of engagement and courtesy, which allowed for the continuation of the level of community they enjoyed. A group of only approximately 10 people, in a relatively small area with low level workstations, which allowed both privacy and visibility, the community gave all the substance and appearances of a thriving caring group.

Behind the warmth however occasional stories existed, of people who found this social and caring community to be occasionally unintentionally exclusive to strangers, and those who were not able to concentrate in the active environment that was fostered.

The group shared a unique trait, in that they predominantly started their phd together, and was offered the 'mezzanine lab space' at relatively the same time, thus allowing for the sharing of the new space from the same 'thesis starting point', which like with any new 'home owner' leads to shared creation of a space and its community behaviour. Leading the creation of this, were the concurrence of what I would term 'catalyst people', who were natural communicators and leaders, and who engaged and embraced the new community, and by charisma and strength of personality, led the creation of the whole culture.

The 'silent community' which was on level 6, had to all appearances the same type of entry gateway, but there the similarities evaporated. Upon entering the doorway, one was confronted with a corridor stretching out before you, which was lined on each side by cubicles which sat in pods of six, each with their own shared mini corridor. The cubicles were constructed of 'gyprock' or plasterboard which had a high acoustic property, which meant that whilst sitting in your cubicle, any noise seemed to be heard 'across the floor' (or appeared to). The partitions were taller than most people, and did not allow for any visibility of who was actually in the cubicles, unlike the mezzanine which allowed for such visibility. Unlike the mezzanine also, the floor had the capacity for approximately 45 people.

This meant that to find out who was actually on the floor, required what I termed a 'covert op' where one had to walk down the mini corridors like a 'stalker', to discover anyone, and upon discovery, because of the enclosed nature of the cubicles that people sat in, led to the people being 'surprised' or even sometimes 'shocked' at your sudden appearance.

The diverse nature of work practices of the individuals, led to their apparent absence also, which was born of the self determinative nature of undertaking a phd, where one can find people who work through the night, and others work through morning periods, only to return to their own home for change and relief from the lab environments (in both labs).

The walls of the corridor and common area were punctuated by a mixture of notes which ranged from threats of copyright breach, to faded photos of social events. Pot plants remained un-watered and only a few people ever used the common area sofa for social interaction, for fear of receiving 'a note' or reprimand. None of the ownership found in the mezzanine community was apparent here.

Anonymity of communication became a familiar theme in my travels of this world- notes would appear mysteriously by unknown hands, requesting adherence to previously unwritten rules relating to 'eating hot food', 'keeping quiet' and 'closing the door'.

Out of perhaps the prevailing sense of isolation, this community appeared to form clusters and cliques which operated separately in a social sense, which would quietly leave the level 6 lab, to meet in other places on the campus more conducive to talk and interaction. Paradoxically again, this community of 'little islands' found solace in the invisible boundaries of their own cubicle , module or social cluster, where friends communicated in quiet whispers and in brief encounters, which did not invade the silence of the sea around them. The cubicles themselves, which seemed to both isolate and envelop you in a gyprock lined cell, allowed again for isolation on one hand, and total exclusive privacy on the other. The

latter was deemed by many to be an overriding advantage toward the intensity and concentration required to write the words of their ultimate and elusive goal – the thesis.

The cubicles also served to provide a personal ‘zone of comfort’, and individual cubicles were in some cases lined with heartfelt memorabilia of a longed for home, that lay thousands of kilometers on the other side of the world. Photos of distant places and idyllic scenery, mixed with photos of loved ones, posters and soft toys, a reminder not only of a distant comfort, but the youth of the community.

No one was sure who set the rules on the floor and the notes, as if by an invisible common hand set out the terms of engagement which were around the constant and ambient theme of ‘silence’ and ‘respect’ for others. Whilst both of these values were to be respected in themselves- in combination, seemed to work in a perfect silent storm, leading to a constant ambient sense of oppression.

Whilst in the mezzanine lab, there were ‘catalyst elements’ for the creation of the culture, similarly on level 6, a few unknown people by a culture of policing, created and maintained the status quo. This would be done through either anonymous notes, or covert complaints to faculty coordinators, who would then relay to the whole community a decree of acceptable behavior that all were to abide by.

In terms of the faculty interaction, upon arrival at level 6 there were few apparent interactive events during the year which brought people together, and the primary source of contact with the faculty was through individual supervisors. Apart from that, the journey appeared to start with being shown your desk, then an induction session later on, and you were then, primarily on your own (or it felt as such).

Unknown to me at the time of my arrival however, changes were afoot through the work of a new innovative research director, who had put in place changes that were to come to fruition through the year, to improve the phd programme and journey. A 3 minute thesis competition had been run the year before, and that together with an ‘annual presentation’ of theses were the two main events of the year. Around the time of my arrival also a regular monthly morning tea was instigated by the faculty.

This whole programme was also in the process of both faculty and university review, where the whole process of phd journey and community was being analysed.

But returning to the little note and what ensued, I felt that I had two choices, either work from home and surrender my desk, or stay and impact the level 6 environment, or at least engage and understand it more. With respect to the former alternative I also realized that I was very lucky to be able to have the choice of surrendering my desk and going home. Many of the international students on the floor did not enjoy the same luxury.

This led to my call to all the phd (and masters) students in the faculty to join a group, which would have a social element, but share in the isolating journey of making a thesis. Within a month to my amazement I had collected a list of 45 students (out of 105) who were interested in such a group, and who upon our first meeting, revealed in many cases, the loneliness and isolation that they had experienced over the years of involvement. An instant community was formed, a programme created for the year, and a philosophy embodied. It said:

“The group is a student initiative and is about community connection, collaboration and sharing of knowledge about thesis making and thesis journey”.

The group was named 'The Cohort Knowledge Share Group'.

With respect to 'thesis making', it was decided that we would study 'ourselves' and the culture of apparent isolation in the phd community. The subject of our study would be the comparison of the two apparently diverse phd communities which existed at the mezzanine and level 6 labs. The study was termed a 'mini-thesis' and given the title: "A Tale of Two Cultures- is it the people or the partitions?"

That was earlier this year, this reflection however is written several months later in November, on the day after the group's final 'wrap up' workshop which collated, collected and analysed the survey, interviews, focus groups, reflections and observations (personal and photographic) of the phd community, and its two separate labs over the course of the year.

Thus the voices ringing in my ears.

The workshop was partly responsible of course, but I felt that the voices were asking me to capture my and their story in some way- not only in the fascinating emergent themes that were revealed at the workshop which are the subject of a group paper, but to reveal the group's journey over the year as well as the wonderful voices of the community who shared their journey with us.

People from both labs willingly and helpfully participated in interviews, surveys and focus sessions revealing the complex beauty of not only an international community, but one engaged in a similar journey and pursuit.

This paper is therefore reflection and acknowledgement and is in gratitude to the voices who woke me in the silence of a summer morning.

And in particular, my new friend- the author of the little note.

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