

The Ephemeral Public

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Abstract

Under the conditions of a pandemic, we have recognised a form of public we identify as ‘ephemeral’. In this paper, we identify the constitutive components of the public pedagogical encounter that give rise to this theorisation. We address the place and time of the encounter, the knowledge that is central to this encounter, the educative agent as pedagogue, and the public as learner—in this case, it is an ephemeral public. Our reading focusses on the structure and nature of each of these. As the term ‘educative agent’ is a recent theorisation (Charman and Dixon, 2021) we have given particular attention to that. Our intent in this paper is to further understand the nature and dynamic of the public that is present in this encounter.

The Spatial and Temporal Location of the Public Pedagogical Encounter

As a response to COVID-19 in Australia, Melbournians were required to remain at home for 112 successive days in 2020. There have been many returns to lockdown in Melbourne in 2021. Nightly television news showed images from other parts of the world of over-flowing and makeshift tent hospitals, the preparation of mass graves and inconsolable grief. Still, the virus felt surreal. An invisible indiscriminate threat continues to cause the world to periodically pause. The authors of this article reside in Footscray in Melbourne. The images central to this article were taken on daily walks in Footscray during those 112 days. Footscray is an inner western post-industrial suburb of Melbourne, which is the capital city of the state of Victoria in Australia. Footscray is one of Melbourne's oldest suburbs, with a population of approximately 97,000 people.

With the exception of one hour a day of outdoor exercise and a visit to a shop for food, we remained bunkered down. Exercise and shopping could only occur within a five-kilometre radius of our homes. Face masks were mandatory. A curfew came into force from 8 pm each evening until 5 am. Heavy penalties applied for those who did not comply. This changed and challenged our collective relationship to a geographically bounded space. These directives were considered for the common good and were subject to occasional modification. The Premier of the state of Victoria appeared daily to advise of the numbers who had contracted the disease and the numbers who had died. These sobering announcements added gravity to the sense of enclosure. Most controversial was the complete shutting down in the north of the city of the public housing towers, home to more than five thousand people. This shutdown was accompanied by a heavy police presence fortifying the estate in order to prevent the spread of the virus but simultaneously creating fear and anger among some residents.

The communication of the government's response to the virus, outlined above, demonstrates Gert Biesta's (2012) understanding of public pedagogy as an instruction of the citizenry. Biesta puts forward three concepts of public pedagogy—pedagogy *for* the public, pedagogy *of* the public, and pedagogy *in the interest of* publicness. In pedagogy *for* the public, he distinguishes a pedagogy aimed at the public. The pedagogical form here is that of instruction. Biesta writes that:

The world is seen as a giant school and the main role of educational agents is to instruct the citizenry. This involves telling them what to think, how to act and, perhaps most importantly, what to be. (Biesta, 2012, p. 691)

There is a question around the nature of compliance during this lockdown as the majority of citizens in Melbourne enacted these externally imposed rules. Biesta's second form of public pedagogy is a pedagogy *of* the public, which is akin to "a giant educational class in which educational agents take the role of facilitator" (2012, p. 692). There were some instances whereby members of the public sought to facilitate a challenge to the rules and direct us as citizens to be defiant.¹ Despite mixed opinions, we still adhered to what was asked of us. Internally, there was a growing sense of confinement with an uneasy feeling of being trapped in a small section of a large city. In response, people walked but only for the permitted hour. The streets were streaming with people walking to their local café, buying take-away coffee and then walking on. Questions were raised as to how to ascertain a walking perimeter of five kilometres—was this distance according to the road system or as the crow flies? Others set targets to walk every street that constituted their particular five kilometres. Schools and universities were closed and classes were conducted online. Only essential workers were permitted to go to work, so residential streets remained full of parked cars. Major road arterials became empty. Extraneous sounds such as the rapidity of nearby trains became intermittent.

1. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-03/melbourne-anti-lockdown-protest-sees-over-400-protesters-arrest/12845120>

Most significantly our suburb, Footscray, sits under a flight path and the absence of planes allowed the sounds of birds to dominate. A new silence descended.

In this instance of lockdown, we note two changes to the public, one is the boundary of the public and private experienced in the home and the second is the nature of assembly. The question these changes raised for us was “Where had the public gone?” This question arose as we were not permitted to congregate in groups of more than two outside of our homes, and then only for the purpose of walking or exercise. The private realm was equally disciplined and constrained. The government entered our houses through new laws limiting entrance to our homes to current residents. The privacy of our homes was breached in this governmental incursion. Our main experience of being part of the public occurred in our homes through online meetings. Like other parts of the world, Zoom and FaceTime became a constant source of bringing people into our private spaces. Boundaries separating public from private began to collapse. This collapse raised the question of the fabrication of any fixed or stable boundary between the public and the private. Savage asserted that “*public* is typically used in mythologized and totalizing ways, operates on a false public/private distinction and fails to account for the disjunctive nature of globalizing publics” (2014, p. 79). The experience of the public/private collapse may change as the pandemic recedes. The question of a sharp demarcation of the public and private remains.

We are interested in manifestations of the public that occur often but go unrecognised. Lockdown created the conditions for particular articulations of the public. The instructional public messages from government and health authorities carried with them the power of the law, including police enforcement to direct people to comply and to issue fines if they didn’t. However, within and against this exercise of power there emerged fledging voices that began punctuating our walks in the form of drawings and objects. We recognise these instances as constituting an authority and a circulation of knowledge within the public realm.

The Knowledge in this Pedagogical Encounter

The intent of the use of the images in this article is not to consider the quality of the photograph or the artwork that is depicted. We are not providing a critical pedagogy reading of this art work. Their place is warranted here as they form the knowledge component of the public pedagogy encounter, which is at the centre of this theorisation of the public. In putting to work these images, we are working from “the middle” (St. Pierre et al., 2016, p. 105) of the unfolding of the nature of the public in these times. Our focus was and still is not on things already thought or made but on things in the making. This work is in nature and shape an immanent and distributed empiricism. The distributed nature of this work relates to its movement through theory practice. These images provoke attention to the complexity of knowledge of the public in the making. Eisner (2008) argues that arts-based research generates questions and addresses awareness of complex subtleties. The nuances of pedagogical encounters are especially difficult to ascertain in the de-institutionalised space of the public realm. These images, and the pedagogical encounters they suggest, address these nuances. The images depict objects and words as messages. Teddy bears were placed on windows and outside to be spotted by children on their walks. Local children made spoon puppets for the community garden. Written messages to the local rubbish removers (garbos), post (mail) people and to the public were placed on the walkways and fences. Angels and other small figurines hung from tree branches over the heads of the walkers.



Photograph: Charman, K 2020



Photograph: Charman, K 2020

The Educative Agent

The public address in these images is made by what we term the educative agent. An educative agent is a member of the public acting beyond a professional pedagogical role who speaks on their own authority to the public. We argue that the educative agent can be identified here even when the public is ephemeral. A significant body of research addresses the multiple forms of public pedagogy and critiques those who can speak. This research includes the identification of ‘counterpublics’ (Warner, 2002) and ‘undercommons,’ which refers to a counterpublic inhabited by Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and disabled and d/Deaf people (Harney and Moten, 2013). The public pedagogue is problematized within these readings of the public. Our reading of the educative agent provides a distinct reading of the public pedagogue.

Our recognition of an educative agent draws on the work on action and speech from Arendt and on *parrhesia* from Foucault. For Arendt, the constituent elements of the public realm are *action and speech*. Arendt (1958) writes of two manifestations of action and speech. The first manifestation is action and speech in the interests that lie between people. The second manifestation occurs when there are no objects through which it can solidify so it is not as tangible as the first manifestation. The revelation of the ‘who’ comes through action and speech. Categories that mark identity as a role such as student, teacher, philosopher or economist all indicate the ‘what’ of a person and bring with them the assumptions of particular attributes and qualities. However, in Arendt’s work something other is revealed through the speaking/acting agent. What this something is can be difficult to define. Arendt argues that as it is impossible to predict the characteristics of the *who* that is revealed she cannot definitively state what the *who* can be. This is because the *who* that is revealed speaks to the uniqueness of each of us. What Arendt (1958, p. 25) does indicate in this revelation is the moment of a beginning, which makes itself visible in the public realm, “...from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded.” In this public realm, there is the possibility of the appearance of the *agent* revealed through speech and action. Arendt (1958, p. 199) writes, “Whenever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” In this second iteration, there is no capacity to predict or control what might arise through the action and speech of the agent and as such we can’t attribute the result to the person who set the idea in motion. This concept is central to Arendt’s theory of the public and to ours, as it is within the public realm that the uniqueness of the who of a person is revealed through action and speech. This revelation of the ‘who’ through speech and action is what we are terming the educative agent. The educative agent is distinguished from the public pedagogue, as the latter speaks or acts from institutional authority. In our reading (Charman and Dixon, 2021 p. 33), the educative agent has the role normally taken by the public pedagogue. The term educative agent comes closest to Biesta’s term educational agent (2012). In Biesta’s interpretation of the educational agent, the public pedagogue is neither an instructor nor a facilitator but rather someone who interrupts (Biesta 2006b). Biesta (2006, p. 693) writes “Such interruptions take the form of what, after Ranciere, we might think of as ‘dissensus’”. Further, this notion of interrupting pertains more to the ideas of publicness. Biesta notes:

To ‘stage’ dissensus is to introduce an incommensurable element—an event, an experience and an object—that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness. It is an element that can act as a ‘test’ of the public quality of particular forms of togetherness and of the extent to which actual spaces and places make such forms of human togetherness possible. (Biesta 2006, p. 693)

What differentiates the educative agent from educational agent is the position of authority and subsequent iteration of knowledge. The very act of knowledge circulation outside of the bounded discursive power of claimed institutional knowledge is itself, broadly speaking, political.

The educative agent for us is tightly bound with Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*—the truth teller (2010). Foucault's work can broadly be defined as an interrogation into how discursive determinants function as power to bind us to specific knowledge regimes. Foucault notes that particular conditions have existed to regulate the speaking subject. In this argument Foucault draws on Kant's philosophical work:

When Kant distinguishes between what is private and what is public, he is not...setting his sights on two domains of activity, one which would be public for certain reasons, and the other which would be private for the opposite reason (Foucault, 2010, p. 52).

Foucault draws on Kant's notion of what separates the private from the public. For Kant, private is not in regard to a domain of things but rather a use, and public is how we put ourselves to work and through this how we use our own faculties (Foucault, 2010). Foucault alerts us to Kant's use of the word private as being synonymous with professional. Significantly, Kant means that an individual is subject to the determinants of the Institution. Here the distinction of when we are enacting ourselves as a universal subject and when we are in fact acting as an individual as part of a larger 'institution' is important. Foucault (2010, p. 53) writes, 'We constitute ourselves as a universal subject when as rational beings we address all other rational beings.' This use of rational indicates the importance of our use of reason. However, often we are dissuaded or denied this use of reason through obedience.

Foucault accords with Arendt in regard to the existence of a proper space, which means a public realm in which to exercise the capacity to speak. Neither institutional constraint nor elements of work determine a proper space. Further, the question of obedience that dissuades our use of reason is central to the circulation of authority and knowledge. What Arendt and Foucault have in common is what for Arendt is the public realm and for Foucault is the scene of address. In the public realm, there is the possibility of the revelation of the who in speech and action and in the scene of address there is the actualisation of the *parrhesia*.

For Foucault (2010) *parrhesia* is the capacity to speak outside of or beyond regulative institutional determinants. This inter-relation between speech, action and *parrhesia* is the crux of our understanding of authority. We argue that creating the conditions for and recognising this configuration of authority is critical for agency and thus change. We think of knowledge circulating within the public realm and, as such, the educative agent is not a fixed position but rather comes to the fore as the knowledge being made manifest shifts. This conceptual framing that separates the *who* and *what* is significant because it creates a new space outside categorisation, offering relief from the interpolation of the subject into the often-detrimental forces of categorisation. In the instance of these images, we can see that the incursion into the public realm was sometimes undertaken by children. Indeed, all of these incursions were created by people unconstrained by professional and institutional settings.

The Ephemeral Public in These Encounters

We consider these images now for the possibilities they offer in understanding the nature of public pedagogy. In particular, we are concerned with understandings of the public revealed in the performance of these objects and drawings. We re-consider the nature of the public pedagogical encounter they evoke with the presence of the educative agent, the flow of authority and the construction and flow of knowledge.

In order to understand the public manifestation in these public pedagogical encounters, we draw on the work of Arendt in regard to the public, and Michael Warner for an

understanding of the public address. Our engagement with the term public looks at what can occur through a different relationship with geographical bounded spaces. The response to COVID-19 through the lockdown in Melbourne generated a different engagement writ large. The teleological structure of capitalism ground to a halt, albeit momentarily. However, at the time there was no knowing how long this moment was going to be. We became bound together as a public in unexpected ways.

In all of the theoretical conceptual understandings of the term public, people coming together is central (Arendt, 1958; Habermas et al., 1964). The term public is also a form of address to 'us' as its members (Anderson, 1991; Warner, 2002). This address is often pedagogical, as its content concerns what is determined to be in 'our' interest, telling us information of which we need to be cognisant (Biesta, 2012). In Arendt's writing on the 'The Public and the Private Realm', she identifies two elements of the public. Firstly, Arendt notes, (1958, p. 50), "...everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity". Secondly, Arendt writes, (1958, p. 52), "...the term public signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us." Arendt (1958) describes the split between the public and the private realm as being demarcated by economics and asserts that these two realms have been in existence since the rise of the city state. She also argues that this stands in contrast to the social realm, which is neither private nor public, but that the social is often conflated with the public realm. For Arendt, the social is a reflection of private interests. Arendt writes that "...private interests assume a public significance that we call society" (1958, p. 33). Arendt argues that the public realm has become diminished in this shift from public to social with the simultaneous rise of economics as no longer being merely a private concern. Given the halt in economic productivity during this time in Melbourne, there was a moment of reparation of what constitutes Arendt's critique of the diminishing public realm. The social as bound by economics receded as new connections emerged. In order to further distinguish this public realm, it is useful to turn to Arendt's three spheres of being that circulate in society: Labour, Work and Action (1958). Here she asserts that Labour is biologically driven and is an activity that is undertaken to preserve ourselves. Work is the activity that moves human existence outside of the so-called natural world to one where human existence is bounded by that which is not the natural. Action is an order of being whereby a new beginning occurs. The public realm is where the possibility of realising the third sphere, that of action and speech, can occur.

During lockdown, the public space of walking paths was silent. It was permissible to be on these paths in pairs but not to congregate or gather in front of the artworks depicted in these images. The public realm was formed by moving individuals and pairs who avoided any proximity to each other. At best when walking we felt the passing presence of a public—a distributed public, a moving public. In this fragmented way, this public can be said to have acted "together in concert" (Arendt, 1958, p. 4), creating a public space where freedom could appear. We were not forced to walk, nor did we walk by necessity, but this walking, this moving, created our only physical experience of being the public. Here was present Arendt's web of relationships, where the space of appearance came into being and where people were together in the manner of speech and action. The togetherness was not actualized in real time, as the other walkers may have moved on, but still their presence was felt. We recognise this as an ephemeral public. The public did not come together, but the walkways were heavy with the fleeting presence of people.

This disconnect between an ephemeral public and an assembled public is informed by the work of Warner (2002). For Warner, initially the public can be the social totality of people in general or it can be a concrete audience, or it can be "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (2002, p. 413). Warner has argued that,

“A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.” He sees the public as self-organised through discourse and not through an external framework (2002). In his theorization, the public is discursively constructed and through this he pays particular attention to the addressee. The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal and it exists only through mere attention. Without attention, it ceases to exist. The entry condition demanded by a public is to come into its range. For Warner (2002, p. 424), a public is “poetic world making.” Attention to Warner is particularly relevant in this context, as the issue of address is significant when the public is largely absent or at best fleeting. These images reflect an intent of public address on the part of the educative agent. The public that is addressed is ephemeral. In our constant movement on the public walkways, we participated in the constitution and the experience of that ephemeral public. These changes wrought by lockdowns in the pandemic have brought attention to an ephemeral iteration of the public, which exceeds the physicality of Arendt’s public realm.



Photograph: Charman, K 2020



Photograph: Charman, K 2020



Photograph: Charman, K 2020



Photograph: Charman, K 2020

A Public Pedagogical Encounter in Pandemic

Returning now to the images of these objects and words, we read them as incursions into institutional demarcations of geographical spaces. The nature of this authority carried through these incursions was an address to our affective experience. As such, these incursions are counter to what Seyla Benhabib (2010, p. 79) writes: “From an Arendtian perspective, however, the most fundamental threat to democratic political activity lies in the loss of responsiveness to events: the erosion of the contexts in which action makes sense.” The educative agent placed their knowledge as object /painted image or word and then left. The walkers came most often in pairs but never as a group. They slowed to watch, linger, discuss and then moved on. The walkers were addressed by these incursions and were drawn into a pedagogical encounter. In being addressed, the walkers experienced being ‘seen’, creating an unusual experience in these constrained times. The traces of the educative agent and the knowledge may have moved with them. In regarding these incursions as speaking to an affective realm and to an ephemeral public, we consider this address as Foucault’s concept of parrhesia. These objects and writing were starkly differentiated from formalised public messages of federal and state health officials whose intent was the preventative spread of the virus, framed through a medical and scientific discourse. Simple but stark, these appeals generated by anonymous residents went beyond their literal representations. Arendt describes the effect of an idea set in motion that it is impossible to know where it will end up. We have theorised this act of sharing knowledge, however fleeting, to be the enactment of the educative agent of knowledge imbued with authority as circulating constantly beyond those in positions of power.



Photograph: Charman, K 2020

In this actualisation of the public pedagogical encounter, authority flows between walker/learner, knowledge and place. Both the educative agent and knowledge have authority. The educative agent speaks or acts, and in the space new knowledge appears. The educative agents speak/act on the authority of themselves and thus enact parrhesia. This act of becoming pedagogical occurs as the one speaks or acts (Arendt, 1958) the one appears and the space for freedom is created. When pedagogy encounters public, what comes into being is the educative agent and the presence of authority.

Importantly, this knowledge and the authority and the capacity to take carriage of it is always possible but as previously mentioned not always recognised. As small five-kilometre bounded communities, we needed hope. Prohibited from physical proximity and in turn fearful, individuals crossed to the other side of the street, skirted others by walking alongside parked cars or waited until sufficient distance was between self and other before walking on. This hyper vigilance where ordinarily there would be acknowledgment was compensated for by these messages. Being addressed by these objects and drawings enabled a re-connection to a broader public realm. Somehow this was qualitatively different to the connection afforded by zoom. These incursions engage the notion of the ephemeral public in a time of COVID-19.

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