What if academia was not a gladiator fight? Reflections on trying to change the discourse from competition to community-building

Andrew G. Gibson and Taina Saarinen

Corresponding author: Andrew G. Gibson, gibsona@tcd.ie

Abstract:

In this chapter we unpack what we experienced during the process of facilitating a group of early career researchers, and how we feel an approach to 'humanising academia' may have helped at least us to envision higher education not in terms of the struggle it is often depicted as, but as a community and a safe space. Setting out with a conscious naivety, either ignoring (Taina) or ignorant of (Andrew) the ways things 'should be done' in the academia, allowed us to start a **critically supportive** community of researchers. This chapter explores how this approach allowed us to engage with different modes of being together, and to reconsider existing forms of togetherness. This being together was related not only to academic hierarchies and positions, but also to thinking, feeling and experiencing. Using lenses from affect theory and queer studies, we discuss how, without quite meaning to, we developed an 'affective community' of those interested in discovering alternative ways to approach the international dimension of higher education. This shows how enacting ideals of community can bring us to build a community beyond hierarchies and competition.

Keywords: academic communities; academic hierarchies; alternative ways of working; alternative internationalisms; humanising the academia; slow academia; queer art of failure

Introduction

We were brought together in 2020, by random chance, to facilitate a group of early-career researchers in higher education internationalisation, during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we started writing this chapter in 2023, we had never actually met each other in person. Working in this way is less uncommon than it once was, but it still feels strange to say, considering that we've known each other for over three years We were coming from different career stages and different academic cultures, Taina at a Finnish educational research institute, and Andrew moving twice during this period from Ireland to Denmark and back. However, we immediately seemed to share an interest in creating a safe and supportive environment for the early-career researchers in the group.

We've worked together since 2020, exchanging hundreds of emails, attending scores of meetings, running PhD summer/winter schools, and many other events. COVID-19 is why we didn't meet at the start, but then circumstances and perhaps a more consciously environmentally responsible attitude towards international travel in this time of global ~~warming~~ boiling meant it wasn't until the late summer of 2023 that we met, face to face. Yet, we know we can write something about building a community in academia, because this is exactly what we have done.

In this chapter, we write about our own personal experiences and trajectories in academia. Our goal is not to encourage others to accept the same harsh and sometimes dehumanising demands of academia ("suck it up, everybody else does"). Rather, we wish to encourage a critical reflection on the structures and practices that constrain us. Beyond that, we also wish to offer an alternative to existing, oppressive modes of being in academia. While we can in no way claim that we actually succeeded in achieving all of our hopes (this would be for others to determine), we would like to unpack what we experienced ourselves during the process. In recent years, challenging the many constraints of the academic world has been done from various critical perspectives, which we have drawn on here. As such, in this chapter, we will use *affective communities* (Gandhi, 2006) and *queering* (Halberstam, 2011) as lenses to rethink community-building and *humanising academia* (see Christodoulidi 2023).

Messy personal paths leading to community-building in 'Alternative Internationalism'

The reason why we took the approach we did could be rooted in personal biography. Andrew, for instance, had a scenic route through higher education, changing disciplines, leaving and working outside the university, and eventually coming back. This gave a taster of the different norms by which academic communities arrange themsedlves and interact with one another. Taina had a somewhat similar personal history, starting with project work in and out of university, graduating with a doctoral degree relatively late, and moving between disciplines and departments. This gave both of us experiences—good and not-so-good—with academic communities and contexts that may or may not be hospitable to newcomers. In some disciplines or fields, for instance, academic conferences and seminars can resemble public death-matches, with 'not-so-much-a-question-as-a-comment's which are designed to take speakers down a notch in the hierarchy—the 'gladiator fight' model of higher education. This might result from different national or institutional cultures, where hazing is regarded as more important than collegiality or pedagogical moments. People from different disciplinary backgrounds can surely come up with their own representative horror stories. We, however, also had

good histories of collegial relationships and experiences of communities outside academia. Having those experiences, we found ourselves more or less consciously wanting to build communities rather than competitions in our academic contexts.

In 2020, the two of us were approached by Professor Sue Wright at Aarhus University, to see if we were interested in getting involved with a 'working group' she knew was at a loose end. Sue was coordinating a larger project looking at the effects of COVID-19 on the European University, and we were responsible for our respective national contexts of Finland and Ireland. Sue asked if we would become the facilitators of a working group of early-career researchers (i.e. Master's students, doctoral researchers, and post-doctoral researchers) looking at internationalisation in higher education that had lost its previous facilitators. We were inheriting the coordinating responsibility from others, but the previous group had gone into abeyance, so it was up to us to decide what we would do next.

We set up a Zoom meeting and talked randomly, excitedly and messily about our interests. Rather impulsively and following our guts, we settled on reframing the approach we wanted to take through the name 'Alternative Internationalisms'. In time, this was affectionately shortened to AltInt. We both felt we wanted to question some hegemonic assumptions about internationalisation of higher education, and wanted to encourage others to join us.

We started running the AltInt group in September 2020, and our working group has been on the go since then, with monthly meetings, and larger events in the conference seasons. Today, this community consists of around 60 researchers from 5 continents, based in many countries around the world. Many members of the group have been mobile to the extent that it has been hard to keep track of them all, as they move between institutions, from position to position, and frequently from country to country.

Our positions and statuses haven changed as well during the period in which AltInt has been up and running. In the beginning, one of us (Andrew) had just started out the post-doctoral stage, then transferred from a position as a precarious researcher with a part-time contract in Ireland to a postdoctoral fellowship in Denmark, and then (finally?) back to Ireland as an assistant professor. Taina, in turn, was not an early-career researcher but an established research professor in an equally established research institute, taking up the position of the Director of that institute during 2023. The nature of the changes in our careers at this time meant pressure was felt in terms of wanting to get

up to speed with our new roles, new contexts, and new responsibilities. In spite of that pressure, an approach to humanising higher education (Christodoulidi, 2023) may have helped us to envision higher education not as the struggle it is often depicted as, but as a community and a safe (or brave, see Arao & Clemens, 2013) space.

A growing affective community

Academic work is largely based on hierarchies of positions that define whose knowledge counts. Cushing-Leubner et al. (2021) have discussed the dos and don'ts of academic paths by using Sara Ahmed's 'straightening devices' as an analytical concept. They discuss the ways and places in which the processes of academic knowledge production are birthed, and how they serve hierarchical social epistemologies. When building the AltInt community, we wanted to ignore the 'way things are done' in higher education and the 'should' of the disciplined academic. Our stories emerge from our own paths. For Andrew, precarity meant hoping to eke out a living across short-term contracts, to perch on the thin ledges of academia's cliff face. In practice, this seemed to mean trying to fit the richness of a life lived into the confines of a job description after job description. "This position is for a policy expert, so now the cover letter says that policy is my life. This role is for a sociologist of education, so now the narrative is that sociology has been a passion of mine since. And so on." By the time we started our group, Taina, in turn, had retold her academic 'career' several times over: At the beginning of 2019, she answered the question *''how do you move 'up' (i.e. out of precarious positions) in academia?' Collecting here wisdoms, (semi)truths, strategies, caveats, and tips for junior/non-tenured Scholars who consider an academic career*' on Twitter (X).[1] She found herself telling a story that she had only started to understand afterwards. This reflection was certainly influenced by a newly awakened interest in alternative histories. Looking back, the past seems inevitable, whereas looking to the future, you notice that different options are genuinely open.

Slowly chipping away at a more encompassing narrative, there is a risk that a transactional relationship emerges not just with 'the university', but with scholarship and ideas themselves. That is, there's a danger that we forget what it was that drew us to research, and study, and write – a danger that we forget the joy of curiosity, and exploration. To resist this, our group was a place where careful career positioning and CV-padding seemed not to gain admittance. As consciously critical of the functional tendency in higher education research, we wanted to focus on what interested us, to see where it might lead—and support the like-minded others, who joined us on the path. For Andrew,

---

[1] See https://twitter.com/tainasaarinen/status/1096385240317206529.

this linked to some of his research on the need for a community in research, and how that was also a need for a community which was 'affective, and attuned to affect' (Gibson, 2022, p. 149). So often when we are doing research we are alone, and we are not just conscious of that isolation—we feel it. Precarity, too, is an affect, as is 'fast' academia. The parallels with other 'affective communities' here (Gandhi, 2006), of marginalized traditions, subcultures, ways of being, together united against oppression, are not accidental. These were some of the theoretical questions we were playing with, which seeped through into our praxis.

We held our monthly AltInt meetings online, and gradually the word spread across different networks, and more people came along to see what this unusually named group was up to. Some stayed and became central to the community that was emerging. In the early days, our meetings were about trying to open up a space to discuss what theories or thinkers we thought might be useful to get to those 'alternatives' to internationalisation we we aspired to understand. We are aware that whether we want it or not, the position of a professor (as in Taina's case) creates a power hierarchy with early-career researchers. So one has, at the very least, to be alert to this. We intentionally wanted to ensure the group remained a supportive and exploratory space, where the doctoral researchers and Masters students took up the same space as the established academics – and we believe that is what has transpired.

At an early event, we asked volunteers to present short five-minute sketches of their work on internationalisation, or concepts and theories they thought others might find interesting. Conversations flowed, links to other areas of research were suggested, and shared folders to exchange relevant papers popped up. After a while, when realising that this was not a full combat arena for comparing whose paper is better, the group members started to share work which was very much in progress. There was trust that this was a group that could be critically supportive, and those only considering or starting out in their PhDs got to see how the "research sausage" was made—in all its messiness.

Queering academic communities

The need for a community can run up against the perceived need to 'pass as affectless because we wish to appear properly "academic"' (Gibson, 2022, p. 150): We are to be independent researchers, ploughing our own furrow, self-sufficient homesteaders of some new realm of knowledge. This tension (between independence and a need for connection) is keenly felt, especially if what we're

researching has implications on our very being, and when we reflect on our being and it shows that there is a 'revealing weakness in the normative practice' (Ndomo, 2020, p. 78) of academia. If we can be forgiven for getting theoretical for a minute, a brief foray into queer theory illustrates part of the issue and maybe a way to side-step the impasse. In Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), the notion of 'queer failure' is suggested as an alternative to prevalent narratives of success. It is also shown to be a route to alternatives to the pressures of 'success or nothing' (important for us, as alternatives are our goal after all). In between discussions of *Toy Story* and *Spongebob Squarepants*, Halberstam offers a way 'to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior' by arguing that holding on to failure as an ideal 'preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood' (p. 3). Andrew introduced the idea(l) of *queer failure* to Taina, and the notion immediately resonated with her goal of not brushing away or hiding academic sidesteps and false starts (Saarinen, 2020), but seeing them as integral parts of both the research we conduct (Ennser-Kananen et al., 2017) and the career paths we make out of that mess.

Eventually, we 'came out' of our AltInt bubble, and shared what we had been doing with a wider scholarly community.[2] The talk Andrew gave sought to make theory critique reality, including his own lived reality, which is how queer theory became a part of how he now approaches his work in researching higher education. Taina's talk that day went back to the root of what we have been doing, by 'unlearning internationalisation' so as to see it differently. At least for Taina, presenting something messy and unfinished was a conscious choice of how to challenge understandings of academic expertise. Presenting unfinished thoughts and insecurities was, however, a choice Taina realised she could not honestly recommend to everyone; for this messiness to lead to fruitful and interesting academic paths for everyone, we also need a university where false starts, retakes, mistakes and missed takes are accepted as part of producing new understandings. At the heart of the community we wanted to buld was the desire to nurture and encourage the growth of a 'brave space' (Arao & Clemens, 2013) where we could look aslant at our area of research.

Admittedly, by taking a "false-starts and messy-sidesteps" approach to our work, we are running 'the risk of not being taken seriously', of not being 'serious' or 'rigorous', which are 'code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6).

---

[2] Andrew's was called 'Queering as weirding: unthinking towards alternatives', and Taina's talk that day was titled 'Unlearning Internationalisation, or Thinking about Possibilities for Seeing Differently'. We delivered these as part of the Alternative Internationalisms session 'Moving beyond dominant imaginaries of 'the international' in higher education', which was for the *European Universities – Critical Futures* Summer School, held online on Wednesday, 30th June 2021.

Nevertheless, we may agree with Halberstam that now is 'not a bad time to experiment with disciplinary transformation on behalf of the project of generating new forms of knowing' (p. 7). Indeed, we think an affective community of research is not just about forms of knowing, but new modes of being together, which, in all its materiality, may direct us back towards new forms of knowing (Engman et al., 2023). There is no rule that says that as soon as a group of people get together to share their thoughts and research, they should operate in a certain way.

Humanising academia

It seems that as soon as a tone of formality enters a specific setting, we lose our creativity and our sense that we have any agency at all. By setting up the AltInt working group, we were, on some level, conscious of this. We did not want to institutionalize our interactions or drain the life out of our work and community. We wanted to be able to make mistakes, to 'fail', to take risks, and also to give space for practices that did not foreground performance and accountability, but kindness and compassion. While we did not have a name for this practice, some concepts in recent literature come close. *Slow scholarship* (see Mountz et al., 2015) or *slow science* (Stengers, 2018) challenge the fast-paced work and compressed time-frames of the neo-liberal academia. One example of *slow scholarship* in action might be the thematic journal issue on Alternative Internationalisms hopefully seeing light in 2024, that we started working on in 2020.

When we started meetings, it wasn't just about reading out the agenda and getting through the 'to-do' list. We wanted to enact community. If we (Andrew!) forgot, then someone (thanks Vesna, also a contributor to this volume!) would often check in on the group, so we could share how we were doing. In order to maintain our overall focus on alternatives, and doing things differently, we needed to ensure we practiced a form of collective thinking, sharing and researching which was respectful, supportive, and enjoyable.

To conclude, we have no way of knowing whether our good intentions amounted to a community that could actually overcome the existing **'straightening devices'** (Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021). Although we did not consciously take up the role of *vulnerable* educators (Christodoulidi, 2023), we certainly tried to challenge the constraints of the hierarchies of today's academia. But we are also aware that academic hierarchies are sticky, and we – especially Taina – already held academic positions that could easily do away with all our efforts of dismantling hierarchies in our mix of early-career and more senior researchers. We also, however, do believe that our effort to normalize a

different way of doing academic 'work' is an important one, not just from the point of view of doing that work but also for challenging hegemonic ways of knowledge production. We know we are not alone in calling for humanising academia. Just as Christodouli (2023) calls for a 'vulnerable educator', we call for more senior academics to model 'vulnerable academics' and to dare to learn together with early-career colleagues. Even an informal online community, such as ours, can produce some cracks in the system, providing possibilities for humanising academia.

Acknowledgements

References

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. Landreman (Ed.) *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (pp. 135-150). Stylus Publishing.

Christodoulidi, F. (2023). A pedagogy of vulnerability: Its relevance to diversity teaching and 'humanising' higher education. *Equity in Education & Society.* Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461231185834

Cushing-Leubner, J., Engman, M. M., Ennser-Kananen, J., & Pettitt, N. (2021). Imperial straightening devices in disciplinary choices of academic knowledge production. *Language, Culture and Society*, *3*(2), 201-230. https://doi.org/10.1075/lcs.21001.cus

Engman, M., Ennser-Kananen, J., & Saarinen, T. (2023). A Diffractive Reading. In J. Ennser-Kananen, & T. Saarinen (Eds.) New Materialist Explorations into Language Education (pp. 175-186). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13847-8_10

Ennser-Kananen, J., Saarinen, T., & Sivunen, N. (2018). It´s not messy but it´s not clean either : Reviewing and discussing an Applied Linguistics textbook through a research ethics lens. *Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 12(1), 71-76. https://doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201805302919

Gandhi, L. (2006). *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship.* Duke University Press.

Gibson, A. G. (2022). Affective Researching, Affective Scenes and an Affective Project. In A. G. Gibson (Ed.) *The Affective Researcher* (pp. 139–160). Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-333-820221006/

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press.

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T. & Curran, W. (2015). For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies,* 14(4), 1235-1259.

Ndomo, Q. (2022). Doing Research for and With Others: A Researcher's Relationship With Research Content. In A. G. Gibson (Ed.) *The Affective Researcher* (pp. 63-94). Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-333-820221003

Saarinen, T. (2020). Korkeakoulututkimukselliset (harha)polut uhkana ja mahdollisuutena [Higher education research (mis)steps as opportunity and threat], *Tiedepolitiikka*, 45(4), 53-54. https://journal.fi/tiedepolitiikka/article/view/100667

Stengers, I. (2018). *Another science is possible. A Manifesto for Slow Science.* Polity.

Author bios

Andrew Gibson is an Assistant Professor in Philosophy of Education at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. He's also co-director of the Cultures, Academic Values in Education (CAVE) research centre. His research interests are in philosophy of education and philosophy more widely, in order to find ways to combine these to look critically at higher education – and to try and do something about improving it too.

Taina Saarinen is a Research professor and Director at the Finnish Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä. Her research career has consisted of several choices that have appeared as missteps or mistakes at the time, but proved interesting and important routes afterwards. Her current false starts include working together with researchers at different career stages and dabbling with crisis leadership, academic wellbeing and MadLibs as methodology.