

Ideational border crossings: rethinking the politics of knowledge within and across disciplines

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This article explores the merits, possibilities and difficulties of making intra and trans-disciplinary ‘border crossings’ essentially of an ideational kind. Drawing ideas from complexity literature, the article lauds the potential of ‘concept studies’ as means of making such crossings and addressing enduring issues (e.g., of equity and health) within education, Physical Education (PE) and Health. The article suggests, however, that the culture of neoliberalism and extant power relations may prohibit rather than nurture and encourage any willing exchange of ideas or sharing of resource, presaging *border closure* rather than ‘border crossing’. Talk of the latter in periods of austerity may become shorthand for ‘rationalisation’, offering new language for a newly invigorated politics of erasure, rather than announcing desire to nurture and actualise new voices and new ways of sharing ideas towards investigating and dismantling enduring social hierarchies and trends.

Keywords: border crossings; education; concept studies; relationships; knowledge/knower structures



Nationality

I've grown past hate and bitterness
I see the world as one
But though I can no longer hate
My son is still my son

All men at God's round table sit
And all men must be fed
But this loaf in my hand
This loaf is my son's bread. (Mary Gilmore, Figure 1)¹

Figure 1. Mary Gilmore, Australian poet. *Source:* Wikipedia.

Background and context

This article is a development of a presentation given at the Australian Association for Educational Research (AARE) conference, Tasmania, November 2011. Its residual conference tone and opening alignments are hopefully excusable and retained here for reasons which will become apparent as the narrative unfolds. The conference paper speaks to an audience of sociologists and educationalists, but reaches out to

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colleagues within and beyond disciplines in the social sciences in its implicit rejection of neo-liberal principles, and advocacy of an attitude of mind that eschews divisive knowledge (and associated social) hierarchies, and instead welcomes ‘border crossings’ especially of an ideational kind (see below). This appeal, however, to some will appear both idealised and illusory given the persistent hegemony of neoliberalism in western and westernised societies, and its unyielding capacity to define the way in which teachers, researchers, students and others think and work in higher education, schools and beyond – somewhat individualistically, divisively and reductively. My understanding of neoliberalism, broadly stated, resonates with Elizabeth Martinez and Arnolando García’s (2012) view:

Neoliberalism is a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last 25 years or so... Around the world, neo-liberalism has been imposed by powerful financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank... the capitalist crisis over the last 25 years, with its shrinking profit rates, inspired the corporate elite to revive economic liberalism. That’s what makes it ‘neo’ or new. (Cited in Treanor, 2011, p. 1)

One of its general characteristics is:

... the desire to intensify and expand the market, by increasing the number, frequency, repeatability, and formalisation of transactions. The ultimate (unreachable) goal of neoliberalism is a universe where every action of every being is a market transaction, conducted in competition with every other being and influencing every other transaction, with transactions occurring in an infinitely short time, and repeated at an infinitely fast rate. (Treanor, 2011, p. 1)

In educational terms ‘neoliberalism is reflected in an educational agenda that privileges, if not directly imposes, particular policies for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction, and testing’ (Burbules & Torres, 2000). It induces and celebrates a performative and audit culture presaging constant surveillance in the work place through relentless assessment and appraisal exercises, the use of performance goals and indicators, heightened competition within and between disciplines and education providers, and creeping privatisation. Together these (and other) practices have if anything fostered hardening rather than erosion of extant social, intellectual and disciplinary hierarchies.

The deleterious effects of neoliberalism on higher education (see Sparkes, 2007), schools (see Ball, 2007; Hill, 2003; Hursh, 2005) and Physical Education (PE), sport and health (see Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008) have been documented in some detail elsewhere, and it is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate them here. The neo-liberal project is mentioned simply as reminder of the cultural backdrop to this paper, the context in which very many researchers work. Certainly, with reference to the aforementioned literature one might be forgiven for asking, why bother to talk of ‘border crossings’ at all, especially in the UK, given the Lib Con coalition Government’s commitment not just to pursuing but extending neo-liberal agendas and ideals (see Hall, 2011) in education and beyond. Notwithstanding such political tendencies, the narrative below simply offers for discussion but one modest means by which research communities in sociology, education, sport, exercise and health might begin to confront the dislocating, divisive individualism of neoliberalism, address its

knowledge hierarchies and perhaps engage anew with enduring issues of social justice in education, sport, and health.

Introduction

I have little memory, least of all for poetry, or anything much else that matters, these days, but I came across the above poem some 40 or so years ago and it has stuck with me ever since; and until recently, indeed, when preparing this conference paper, I had no idea of its origins. How ironic given my long association with Australia to discover that it has Australian roots and powerful association with socialist and humanist ideals. It is written by Mary Gilmore, poet, author, socialist, humanist, iconic figure in Australian politics and history. Unbeknown to me she's been with me every time I stepped on these shores. Despite having used them rather a lot when on this soil, I remained oblivious to the fact that Gilmore's image appears on the Australian \$10 note. She has been the ghost in my machine so to speak: haunting me, prodding and troubling my conscience over very many years – especially as I have watched modern day conflicts unfold at home and abroad.

I guess the poem moved me emotionally all those years ago, just as it does now, because it spoke to me of the principles of Methodism and Socialism that my family once espoused, which I had warmly embraced and because it so well captured the difficulty of realising them. It speaks of the frailty of the human condition: the enduring conflict between, on the one hand, the goodness and generosity of the human spirit – our desire to reach out the hand of kindness, offer help, share resource, support others in trouble or need, to 'see the world as one'; and, on the other hand, the felt necessities for human actors to preserve and protect those close to them, which becomes more urgent in times of scarce resource: 'This loaf is my son's bread'.

Gilmore's poem has sprung to mind so many times over recent years, for one reason or another, not least as I have watched the destructive imperial interests of nation states unfold (e.g., as they search for and usurp others' 'black gold'), but also, much more modestly and locally, as I and others have tried to reach out and make border crossings in the form of collaborations with other disciplines of the social sciences in our own institutions, or endeavoured in our research on Health and young people to enter the public health terrain in the hope of sharing ideas and 'findings' with those holding very different views to our own, only to be met not with warm, open embrace but stern resistance, sometimes venomous hostility, towards the ideational 'resources' that we have sought to share. 'Border crossings – nice idea' one might say; 'pity about the reality'. Such matters, however, have been thrust again to the forefront of thinking of recent years as the ideas of complexity theory have become fashionable in academia, reflected perhaps in the flier for the AARE 2011 conference:

The theme of this year's conference is *Researching across Boundaries*. Education occurs in many places and spaces and we encourage researchers from Australia and our international colleagues to bring local, national and global perspectives to engage with the theme *Researching across Boundaries*. Boundaries could include, though not be limited to: researching across sectors and agencies, workforce planning to address issues of regional disadvantage, the legacy and implications of recent reviews into schooling, higher education and the academic workforce, interdisciplinary research, and so on.

Researching across Boundaries may involve new approaches to teaching and learning, new forms of collaborative leadership and management and new approaches to meeting challenges in research methodologies, production and publication.

It is exciting rhetoric. An appeal for sharing of thought, practice (and by implication resource), both within intellectual communities and between academia, professional agencies and the communities of practice they serve – border crossings – of a kind that in theory, or spirit at least, many, personally, socially, intellectually, politically, pedagogically, might approve. But what are the merits and possibilities of making such crossings? Are they inherently a good thing? The difficulties, inherent dangers (see Moran, 2002, 2006) and possibilities (see Kellie, 2009) of mixing/merging intellectual (and epistemological) traditions, of dissolving disciplinary or knowledge structures that make very different assumptions about knowledge and ‘being’ in the world, are well rehearsed and we need not attend them here. However, we need note that these difficulties of social, political and epistemological kinds continue to unfold. Knowledge structures are endorsed, nurtured and cultivated by ‘knower structures’ comprised of:

... actors with passions, hopes, desires, emotions and so forth, whose practices legitimate different kinds of actors (*and world views* – my parenthesis). Social fields thereby comprise knowledge-knower structures which classify, assign, arrange and hierarchise not only what but also who is considered legitimate. (Maton, forthcoming, p. 4)

One cannot, therefore, underestimate the challenges of making border crossings. No easy task at the best of times, they are doubly difficult in times of scarce economic resource: ‘This loaf is my son’s bread’. As others have pointed out,² the reductionist and divisive research assessment exercises that now feature in Higher Education in the UK and elsewhere, and in funding council (Higher Education Funding Council England [HEFCE], 2011) privileging of STEM (science, technology, mathematics and engineering) disciplines have presaged heightened differentiation of roles and responsibilities, rather than collaborative endeavour, a distancing of tasks and people (Sparkes, 2007). There is on-going selfish chase for scarce resources, competition to recruit talent/human resources that will keep already well-benefited institutions at the top of their academic trade. Border crossings have arguably never been more necessary or vociferously articulated while also never being less likely to occur. Moreover, what to some will appear as charitable and collaborative acts of liberation and enlightenment, others may experience as vandalism or aggressive crusade, invasion of sovereignty, threat to ways of life, culture, country and one’s home. So, in academia, as in politics and warfare, we cross borders at our peril, either with eyes wide open, knowledgeable of the risks, attendant pitfalls and potential damage to be done to the communities we invade/embrace (Moran, 2006), cognisant of the need for exit routes and to rebuild programmes if all goes horribly wrong; or we should not cross them at all.

Now, of course, one might say this is a particularly pessimistic and materialist way of looking at border crossings. It is easy to believe that in this IT savvy, information age, there are no barriers to sharing resource (ideas, knowledge, etc.) other than those of our imagination (and capacity to buy a state of the art mobile phone). There are no borders, at least not of an ideational or symbolic kind. We traverse nations/continents daily, routinely in our work, at will, at the press of a

keyboard button; there is a constant, relentless flow and exchange of information, ideas and thoughts across continents. However, as the brief and, for some, already tragic 'Arab spring' demonstrated, while digital crossings may traverse symbolic borders, they do little to dismantle the power and authority structures that sustain physical and political ones; indeed, they may not merely circumvent but obfuscate oppressive state apparatus and attendant inequities.

So what kind of border crossings can we make without doing damage to the communities we serve and seek to embrace? How and where might we begin such an adventure as researchers (if we consider them worthwhile)? Despite gnawing pessimism and remaining cognisant of attendant pitfalls, I want to suggest that there are real merits of making border crossings at least of an ideational kind in academia, education, PE, sport and health and that now, more than ever, are they needed if our goal is to advance thinking in our subject/discipline while aiding the cause of social justice in and outside schools. That the crossings I speak of are of a limited/restricted kind acknowledges the need to begin this adventure modestly. It also reflects of my own psychological bent – my reluctance to engage in crossings that involve more socially collaborative acts. However, I will suggest later that these are perhaps a necessary feature of more lasting engagements. But for the moment I refer only to *ideational crossings* – adventures of the conceptual kind that we need take if our aim is to move our research forward, and to facilitate understandings as pedagogues, sociologists and sport scientists of such things as equity, social justice and social democracy that preoccupy our intentions in and outside schools.

There is nothing new (TINN)

Let us return to Mary Gilmore's poem. It speaks in a very obvious way of two kinds of relationship: 'relations to' (others) and 'relations within' (the family, both in its immediate mother/father/guardian-child and sibling relationships and broader, aunts, uncles and cousins sense). The moral compass of the 'relations within', the *voice* of the family itself and its resources, critically implicate relationships and the nature of messages relayed to and with others outside – its 'relations to'. Simultaneously, relations with families set agendas with which each has to deal. And while it is tempting to see these as two distinctly separate forms of social practice (or of doing sociology, or other forms of science if you like), they are not (Evans & Davies, 2011). Rather, while they can be differentiated as relations 'within' and 'across' knowledge communities, these relational dynamics are intrinsically interactive. Either to dichotomise them, or to neglect one in considering the other, will fail to comprehend either. Certainly much of the Sociology of Education and Physical Education, sport and health can, indeed, be categorised as a sociology of 'relations to'; it addresses ways in which attitudes towards and understandings of 'other' individual bodies and populations are nurtured and configured within and in *relation to* culture, not least by messages and power relations transmitted through public knowledge, popular pedagogies, formal education policies, the body pedagogies of schooling and informal family and peer practices. So we attend to how children and young people are positioned in 'relation to' the messages of education (e.g., purveyed through PE, sport, or health) and, in the process, are either excluded or included from its culture and resources by virtue of their age,

ability, race, class, gender, sexuality and class. Indeed, some years ago Henry Giroux (1992) spoke of the attitude of mind that students needed to adopt if they were to attend such ‘relations to’ and cross borders in a culturally sensitive, non-damaging way:

The category of border . . . speaks to the need to create pedagogical conditions in which students can become border crossers *in order to understand otherness in its own terms*, and to further create borderlands in which diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities within existing configurations of power. (Giroux, 1992, p. 28, *my emphasis*)

Here then is a concept of border crossing grounded in the ‘relations to’ sociology of the 70s, 80s and 90s; an appeal for heightened sensitivity to others’ cultures – now a much more accepted mind-set than formerly of those who might aspire to sociological and educational research. Giroux’s appeal to address relational borders ‘within’ pedagogic discourse itself, however, received far less attention, perhaps because he aimed his discourse at how ‘students’ rather than the research community itself should self-reflect. However, there has been something of a sociological turn of recent years, from interest in the study of ‘relations to’ towards ‘relations within’, increasingly centred not just on how individual researchers and populations are positioned in ‘relation to’ knowledge, discourse and culture, but also ‘relations within’ them.³ Both the structure of the relay (i.e., the social relations of knowledge production and dissemination) and its culture (see Maton, 2006, forthcoming) (i.e., the voice of the research community itself) may help sustain boundaries within and between knowledge communities, and facilitate or constrain accumulation of knowledge, with consequent possibilities for social and educational change. Indeed, Evans and Davies (2011) have been among those suggesting that a different kind of Sociology of Education and Physical Education and Health may be emerging, constituting a shift that takes as its object the specialised discourse of education, the medium of reproduction that is associated with ‘knowledge and the manner of its transmission, acquisition and evaluation’ (p. 264). Bernstein refers to this as the ‘voice of pedagogy’ (1990, p. 190) that is constituted by the pedagogic device (see Maton, 2006; Moore, 2006), illuminating in the process ‘what makes some ideas, texts, actors, group or institutions special or appear to partake of the sacred, and others profane’ (Maton, 2006, p. 44).

Such interests in the structure (the social relations of knowledge production) and structuring of knowledge have been voiced increasingly widely in the social sciences, most recently amongst those espousing variants of ‘complexity’ (e.g., Davis & Sumara, 2008; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2006). Theirs is an appeal for progress beyond disciplinarity and towards disciplinary, conceptual and ideational border crossings both within and between the social and physical sciences in the interests of better addressing substantive interests that are of shared concern. As leading proponents of complexity theory, Davis and Sumara’s (2008) view is:

Education and educational research conceived in terms of expanding the space of the possible rather than perpetuating entrenched habits of interpretation, then, must be principally concerned with ensuring the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined. (p. 38)

But:

Although undeniably important, personal and group interactions for their own sake may not be as vital or as useful as is commonly assumed. Rather, *the neighbours that must interact* with one another are ideas, hunches, queries, and other manners of representation. (p. 40, Original emphasis)

But how is this neighbourly interaction of ideas to be engaged? Giroux (1992, p. 27, quoting Spivac, 1990) alluded to the challenges of addressing crossings of this kind:

...more is at stake than problematising discourse: more importantly, educators and cultural workers must be engaged in 'the unlearning of one's own privilege' so that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency. (p. 42)

To 'unlearn' (or at least seriously problematise) the foundational assumptions, concepts, ideas, of one's discipline and the criteria used to assess and evaluate the knowledge it produces is, of course, a pretty big ask as is that of becoming multi-lingual, expert in the languages of different disciplines, cultures and codes. Learning the language of one's own discipline is challenging enough let alone those of others, yet, facility across them is often a precondition to being considered 'competent', allowed access to and accepted on to another's cultural terrain. Again we are mindful that Giroux was asking for more than just a focus on 'relations to'; for him border crossings meant educating (and providing opportunity for) students not only to engage with 'different cultural codes, experiences and languages and reading these codes historically and critically', but also simultaneously to learn 'the limits of such codes, *including the ones they use to construct their own narratives and histories*' (1992, p. 29, emphasis added). That is to say, he was articulating the need to pay as much attention to relations (knower structures) *within* one's own discipline and wider community of practice and the cultures and codes that sustain and underpin them as to those between it and others' cultural understandings. So, again, we ask, how are such interactions to occur? How and, indeed, where, are 'ideas, hunches, queries, and other manners of representation' to be engaged?

Ideational crossings: from 'relations to', 'to relations within'

Davis and Sumara (2008) claim that the great contribution of the hard science branch of complexity research is its clear demonstration that many phenomena can only (I would prefer to say 'best') 'be understood by examining them at the levels of their emergence' (p. 36). As new systems arise, they say, 'so do new possibilities and new laws that cannot be anticipated, even with the most intimate knowledge of the components or agents comprising the new system'(Davis & Sumara, 2010, p. 857). Arguably, every research and pedagogical encounter (in no matter what discipline we serve) represents a 'moment' of this kind; 'particular constellations of events pregnant with possibility (or possibilities) not to be met with at other times and under different circumstances' (Davis & Sumara, 2010, p. 857). In such circumstances new opportunities and the need for ideational border crossing arise.

Like Davis and Sumara (2010, citing Usiskins, Peressini, Marchisotto, & Stanley, 2003, p. 1), I'd like to suggest that the notion of 'concept analysis' might provide

some means of facilitating such crossings, involving, as it does, ‘tracing the origins and applications of a concept, looking at the different ways in which it appears both *within and outside* a particular discipline or subject’ (mathematics in their case) and ‘examining the various representations and definitions used to describe it and their consequences’ (emphasis added, p. 857). Conceivably, the idea of ‘concept studies’ has enormous potential for research, as well as the teaching and learning contexts to which Davis and Sumara refer. Committed to ‘expanding the space of the possible’ and pursuing new understandings we might, for example, engage this process with some of the key concepts that define our PE, sport, exercise and health fields, e.g., health, embodiment, ability, physical literacy, equity, equality, inclusion, teaching, learning, research, pedagogy, etc. interrogating them both: *internally* – as emerging from and active within the ‘knower structures’ – the social relations which define research communities within and outside the social sciences; *externally*, from within communities of practice outside them which we serve; and *relationally* as configured through the relationships between these processes.

Now, of course, one might say there is nothing new in this within sociology and the sociology of education, sport and PE. To be sure, at least those of us with constructivist dispositions have engaged over many years with the way in which, for example, particular concepts such as ‘ability’ or ‘health’ have been defined within and outside the education profession, but rarely have we gone on to explore how such definitions have been configured (and might be reconfigured) and defined in the relations between the ‘relations within’ and the ‘relations to’ the communities we serve. Our previous work, for example, on young people and health (Evans et al., 2008) has made problematic ways in which health has been brought into existence and defined (somewhat reductively we claim) within the biosciences and sections of the social sciences that feed public health knowledge and has sought to offer counter definitions interrupting ‘normative’ ways of thinking about health. However, it has been rather less reflexive as to the origins, encodings and limits of its own stance/definitions regarding health, or its relationships to public health knowledge/s, prompting a hardening of attitudes and closure of boundaries on all fronts (between and within different forms of science). And without an adequately transdisciplinary-informed theory of health or ‘body knowledge’, or, specifically, how the concept health is configured both ‘within’ and ‘between’ communities of practice (academic and non-academic), our perspectives have consequently been resigned to position-taking and polemic, claim and counter-claim around who has the better version of truth (Zanker & Gard, 2008). Standpoint research such as this regarding obesity and health renders us unable to determine what health or other knowledge/s can be trusted and accepted and should be taken seriously and reflected in communities and schools (Evans et al., 2008).

Concept studies *as pedagogy* might involve, for example, Ph.D. students (in physiology, psychology, sociology, etc.) about to embark on ‘obesity research’, interrogating how meanings around ‘health’ are (and have been historically) configured within both their own and others’ research communities, what criteria are used to assess their merit, and how such definitions might relate to those of others in communities being researched; all the while leaving open the possibility for new understandings (and definitions) of health to emerge in the research act – in the *relations between* the research community and the populations they research. Other core key concepts which properly trouble education, sociology and other sports

science fields, like ‘ability’, equity, performance or accountability, might be subjected to similar scrutiny. The idea of ideational border crossings, of course, is not to suggest that there are ‘simply’ other more useful or better concepts of equity or health to be sought and found ‘out there’ or ‘elsewhere’ (among other disciplines), or that serious material inequities will go away if we simply think differently, but rather to consider afresh how concepts such as equity and health are themselves fluid and iterative, the products of collaborative (and/or isolated power invested) interactions *in situ*, not least those forged amongst the relationships within and between research communities and others outside them.

Some further indication of how the research process itself might begin to acknowledge these complex relations is beginning to emerge. Research in the sociology of education, for example, centred on concepts of ‘equity’ (Savage, 2011; Thomson, 2011) and ‘accountability’ (Brennan et al., 2011; Zipin, Lingard, & Brennan, 2011) is exploring not only how these concepts have been configured (and are being reconfigured) (1) globally, nationally, locally and institutionally by powerful ‘others’ outside the research community, e.g., by government agencies and financial institutions who espouse neo-liberal ideals; (2) within the research group itself; and (3), amongst populations being ‘researched’. Critically, it is also exploring how, in the research process itself (in collaborative ‘relations within and between’ these different populations), new dialogic options might be opened for new assemblages of meaning around ‘equity’ and ‘accountability’ to emerge.

There is no alternative?

What, then, will it take to interrupt normative thinking on these matters, and to fundamentally shift (and advance) how we think about the nature of research, or more specifically, knowledge, the criteria we use to judge it, and the relationships between knowledge and knower? In terms of pedagogy, Davis and Samura (2010) suggest that extending Usiskin et al.’s (2003) description of ‘concept analysis’ so as to include ‘ways of representing ideas to our students, presenting alternative definitions and their implications, histories and evolutions of concepts, applications while also exploring “learners” interpretations of what they are learning’ (p. 857), might help in this endeavour (see the example of health and obesity research mentioned above). This, they suggest, would not only mean embracing the suggestion that ‘knowledge domains are complex – evolving, adaptive systems that arise among but cannot be reduced to the components and agents that constitute them’, but also making a ‘deliberate effort to pay attention, simultaneously to *knowledge-producing systems* and the *systems of knowledge produced*’ (p. 857, original emphasis). The idea of ‘concept studies’, then, is fundamental to the idea of ideational border crossings. It has the capacity to not only help disrupt thinking about the way in which knowledge/s are produced via ‘relations within’ research communities and the social structures that sustain them, but also reconfigure the ways in which we think about engagements with the knowledge/s (and key concepts) of those others with whom we ‘relate to’. This, Davis and Sumara attest, has the potential to interrupt ‘the everyday tendency to discuss knowers and knowledge (or researchers and researched) as ‘discrete phenomena that must somehow be bridged or united’ (2010, p. 858). As they point out, this tendency, to treat knowers–knowledge as a dichotomy rather than a simultaneity, has ‘contributed to profound tensions in the

education community – articulated, for example, in endless debates over the relative merits of classrooms (and other pedagogical contexts) that are teacher (/coach) centred (i.e. privileging established knowledge) or learner centred (i.e. privileging developing learners)’ (p. 858).

In research terms, it has tended to fixate debate on the merits of researcher or research subject led research so that, more often than not, even a shift in theoretical perspective or in methodology remains within a ‘transmissive stance’, involving a shift not in power relations or thought processes, but in technique, obfuscating that researchers are ‘actively shaping culture by their relationships rather than centring attention on relationships between different kinds of knowledge producers, invoking new boundaries between knowers and yet to be known’ (Davis and Sumara, 2010, p. 858). This view of concept studies, then, demands the realisation that researchers, like teachers or coaches, are ‘actively shaping cultural possibilities’ around, say, equity or health, ‘through selecting and amplifying particular concepts, interpretations, and applications’ (p. 858).

Perhaps the most important (but also the most problematic) insight offered by Davis and Samara (2010), however, lies in their claim that the power of ‘concept studies’ is ‘hinged to the deliberate attention given to the diversity it seeks’. Briefly, ‘the diversity in any complex learning system is in essence the source of its intelligence’ (p. 858) because ‘at this juncture, somehow dissenting voices and the jagged edges of contrasting opinions leads to collective products that are more useful and more insightful than the lowest-common denominator solutions that seem to spark little disagreement (and, consequently, limited engagement)’ (p. 859). This indeed is both the promise and the pitfall of complexity ‘theory’. To be sure, excitement and insight are to be found in abundance in ideational research at the hinterlands, where one’s own and others’ conventional thinking, ideas and concepts are brought into relief and directly confronted. However, bearing in mind our opening observations regarding the potential psycho-socio-political pitfalls of border crossings, we might also note that this is also where the greatest possible risks occur for doing damage to, or being damaged by/on, another’s terrain. Our (Evans et al., 2008) engagements with public health researchers have all too rarely been occasions of shared understanding and mutual exchange of ideas. Border crossings, even if only of an ideational kind, if divorced from considerations of power, vested interest, control and the cosmologies that sustain communities, are destined at best to disappoint, at worst to damage the very people they seek to serve. Where there is no equal exchange of knowledge/s, initiatives of this kind may merely presage rationalisation, the diminution of knowledge/s considered ‘weakest’, least able to demonstrably meet performative or other dominant/hegemonic goals. As Giroux discovered some years ago, there will always be a danger that beneath the surface of this liberating rhetoric is a politics of erasure (1992, p. 4).

To be sure, understanding social inequalities and processes of embodiment might benefit from the kind of border crossings outlined above: engagements not just with concepts and ideas within and between perspectives within the social sciences and humanities, but also with the knowledge/s of other relevant disciplines and of the communities they each serve (see, for example, Kalitzkus & Twohig, 2006). There is no one or single way to research, teach or innovate in directions that contest injustices of class and cultural inequalities and foster ‘progressive’ social change. And research (relations) alone, no matter how well or differently configured, cannot help

assuage rooted social problems and injustices unless it deals with the complex multiple realities and interests which guide its actions. Its practices themselves too often reflect wider class and cultural interests, hierarchies and power relations. For this reason, the apparent, more imagined than real naivety of 'complexity theory' may not be to everyone's methodological taste, especially if its narratives fail to address social hierarchies and iniquities inherent in the research community itself, whilst proclaiming the virtues of contesting and de-balkanising others.⁴ However, at the same time, engaging with the core concepts that emerge from and define our disciplinary cultures and the perspectives, methodologies and other perspectives and disciplinary interests is not 'sell out'. It need not risk reductionism, seek appeasement of those whose perspectives we deeply dislike, or produce research insipidity. It is simply to acknowledge that 'border crossings', if approached in principled manner involving sharing ideas, concepts and practices between researchers, researched and others with vested interests in the outcomes and implications of what we say and do, is now more than ever what is needed if we are to better address persistent hierarchies, inequalities and power relations, and to better understand the role and importance of research communities in both shaping and contesting these things.

None of this need involve relinquishing commitments to our parent disciplines or the perspectives of those many 'great thinkers' who properly define, inform and fire our trades. Like others, we (Evans & Davies, 2011) have argued that the turning away from classical figures in mainstream sociology and the crucial categories of the grand narratives of class, race, gender, and ability in recent years may have been at the expense of important insights on issues, such as equity and justice in education, morality, poverty, that should touch the interests of all in education and PE (Eagleton, 2003). Fortunately, sociologists in education, PE and Health have largely avoided such trends, remaining grounded in enduring interests and agendas of education and its practitioners in schools and elsewhere. Though invigorated, and deriving insights from 'new' social theory, theirs has been an enduring commitment to issues of prejudice, class, sexism, racism and elitism, always with an eye on their educational implications for teaching and how children learn, succeed or fail.

However, we have not escaped factional tendencies. Students of sociology and the sociology of PE sport and health are too often required to learn to speak particular social theoretical languages, for example, of Marxism, or post-structuralism, or figurational, interpretive or critical social theory, and tend to become socialised deeply into the underlying codes and modes of their (or more particularly, their teachers') perspectives. (I daresay such tendencies – 'untouchable founding figure syndrome' – prevail in other disciplines of sport, exercise and health too.) Intellectual capital and its value, status and reward are bound up with the language and its defence from the challenge to other languages (Bernstein, 2000, p. 162). Furthermore, the more members are isolated or excluded from each other (and not just within research communities but the different factions within the professional communities of PE and health), the weaker the social base for the development of either repertoires or reservoirs of knowledge with which to interrogate and understand the social world becomes. One learns a particular gaze, 'how to recognise, regard, realise and evaluate legitimately the phenomenon of concern' (p. 171). Our students spend years determining what position they should stand for, what approaches they represent, thus learning to enter research environments with eyes wide shut to the possibilities that other perspectives and forms of theory and

professional understanding might offer. Counter-theorising is weak, even regarded with suspicion. One learns to be afraid to think outside the frame. These limiting features of strongly bounded knowledge structures and the social relations which support them also have the potential ‘to shatter any underlying sense of “unity”’ (p. 171) among and between researchers in a way which may inhibit progress and, with it, the confidence to move out of and beyond the conceptual family home. It is hardly conducive to the kind of ‘concept studies’ outlined above.

Conclusion

If nothing more, then, doing *research* in sociology and the sociology of PE, exercise, sport, and health, if it is to be most productive, requires a shift from commitment to a language to ‘dedication to a problem and its vicissitudes’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 171). As Eagleton (2003, p. 22) argued, it is to ‘strike out from well-trodden paths of class, race, gender, and look afresh and again at questions that have been shelved’. ‘Concept studies’ at least points us in that direction, especially if it precipitates, as Davis and Sumara (2010, p. 859) suggest, ‘an evolution in thinking flagged by subtle shifts in language’ (and thought) centred on ‘transdisciplinary study of core concepts’⁵ (e.g., health, ‘ability’, equity) ‘as they are both found and emerge within disciplines or sciences and outside them in the communities they serve’. Laying out our basic ideas and procedures to inspection and critique will be part of this process and require conceptual exchange and collaboration; it will mean pursuing collaborative tasks; avoiding caricature and/or pathologising the words and deeds of others, interpersonally to internationally; and ensuring that both research and teaching aim for the same model of exploring conceptual origins, differences and structures.

There are, of course, inherent tensions in endeavouring to achieve this, i.e., moving beyond such confrontational and bounded stances. As one of the reviewers to this paper so helpfully pointed out, ‘there is both desirability and danger in pursuing consensus whereby a range of knowledge workers can collaborate, and sustaining the creative possibilities of dissensus both within and across different knowledge communities’. Both ideational ‘conflict’ and ‘consensus’ have as great a potential to precipitate stasis and inertia as to stimulate progress and change. Notwithstanding, concept analyses invite researchers and pedagogues not to dissolve or ignore such tensions, but embrace them positively and creatively engage the possibility that one can retain strong subject specific attachments and allegiances whilst searching for heightened and shared understandings on ideational common ground. In the process it might also be possible to reflect critically on complexity ‘theories’ inherent tendencies towards epistemological relativity while retaining the axiological importance of commitment to certain ethical-political purposes, particularly around contesting social-structural injustices that, for all that their mechanisms change continually across time and space, remain intractably durable in time and widespread across space. Carrying both axiological⁶ and epistemological understandings across ideational borders with the possibility of having to rethink, reshape or revoke both, will, indeed, be a challenging and unsettling aspect of meeting ‘concept studies’ ideals.

While acknowledging that all these processes are sources of potential new understanding, at more embodied and personal levels the project must then become not just one of doing ‘better’ sociological or educational or sports science theory or

method but actively pursuing different relationships and ideational transactions within and between the ‘academic’ disciplines and researcher and researched in order to throw light on the complexity and nuances of the influence of research itself in the production of social inequalities and hierarchies. This is not something that everyone is inclined or disposed to psychologically, affectively or politically (see Davies, Corbishley, Evans, & Kenrick, 1985). Ultimately, however, neither the sociology of education, nor policy, nor teaching, coaching and teacher education, nor research, will achieve very much by way of social and educational innovation unless greater recognition is given to understanding the social relations, including the practices of scientific communities, by which knowledge is produced and relayed.

Finally, again it is important to emphasise that talk of ‘border crossing’ although invaluable and necessary for the reasons outlined above, in periods of austerity requires great caution. It may, if approached with eyes wide shut to the politics of knowledge, merely become shorthand for ‘rationalisation’, offering new language (to government, funding agencies, university chancellors and their minions, etc.) for a newly invigorated ‘politics of erasure’ leading to further erosion of sciences and research communities considered ‘low status’ and performance vulnerable, rather than announcing desire to nurture and actualise new voices and new ways of sharing ideas towards investigating and dismantling enduring social hierarchies and trends (see Moran, 2006). As others have reported, it is clear that the overall shape of the different audit exercises that govern academic activities in the UK and elsewhere is now ‘being determined by the requirements of the largest players, namely the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects’ (Holmwood, 2011, p. 1). Thus, in the UK:

... the Royal Academy of Engineering has recently called for, ‘a higher proportion of our research investment [to go] ... towards high quality research that is likely to lead to near- to mid-term economic benefit’ ... Part of the current crisis facing the non-STEM subjects is the way in which the interests of the STEM subjects are coming into conflict with those of non-STEM subjects. In the process, the standard ‘research-teaching’ contract that sustains the arts, humanities and social sciences is coming under threat. (Holmwood, 2011, p. 1)

Border crossings in current context, then, may understandably seem at best risky, at worst foolhardy, and will not be for the faint hearted. Those of an ideational kind may be modest but worthy best endeavours in such inclement times.

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Notes

1. Mary Jean Cameron was born on 16 August 1865 at Cotta Walla near Goulburn, New South Wales. Her first volume of poetry was published in 1910, and for the ensuing half-century she was regarded as one of Australia’s most popular and widely read poets. In 1908,

she became women's editor of *The Worker*, the newspaper of Australia's largest and most powerful trade union, the Australian Workers Union (AWU). She was the Union's first woman member. *The Worker* gave her a platform for her journalism, in which she campaigned for better working conditions for working women, for children's welfare and for a better deal for the Indigenous Australians. In later life Gilmore wrote a regular column for the Communist Party's newspaper *Tribune*, although she was never a party member herself. Honours: Gilmore's image appears on the Australian \$10 note, along with an illustration inspired by *No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest* (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Gilmore).

2. Furlong (2011) notes that one of the consequences of the growing power of globalisation has been that all universities now find themselves having to become neo-liberal institutions, much more entrepreneurial in their search for resources in the process of marketisation. In that process there is heightened differentiation between roles, the returnable and non-returnable – teaching and research and internal jockeying for scarce resources. His evidence suggests that marketisation and growing emphasis on income generation has put strong pressure on institutions to change their approach to management oriented towards explicit and measurable standards of performance, as against trust in professional standards and professional expertise. In this high risk performative culture, 'insecurity becomes the driving force – reducing education – a holistic exercise to its mundane attributes' (pp. 10–11).
3. Theories addressing 'relations to' are absolutely vital in illuminating how particular identities and social practices perpetuate injustices, not least through school processes. They are rarely entirely divorced from study of 'relations within' but even then the disciplines and perspectives from which they emerge alone tell us too little of how the social relations of knowledge production themselves constrain ways of understanding and prohibit deeper insights or capacities for social change. Even when sociology or educational research is 'relational' in perspective and focus, as much of our own and others has been in recent years, *if set within atomistic disciplinary settings* and insensitive to 'relations within', the understanding it produces continues to nurture artificial bipolarities and the absurdity that only a particular approach or its methods or, quaintly, those attaching the label 'critical' to their enterprise, are capable of showing effective concern, or sufficient reflexivity in dealing with issues of social justice.
4. How power and authority relations enter into relationships of teaching (or research) is treated somewhat prosaically in Davis and Samara's (2010) work via the notion of 'enabling constraint'. In their terms, an 'enabling constraint' is a:

set of limiting conditions that is intended to define the field of play in a collective engagement. By way of familiar example, a sport's rules or a nation's laws are enabling constraints that operate, in the main, by defining what cannot be done – thus opening the door to endless possibility by permitting everything else. (p. 859)

Furthermore, complexity literature's concentration on knowledge structures (the vessel – relay), although hugely valuable, ironically often seems at the expense of attention to the nature of knowledge itself – to what is being relayed, the message, leaving its discourse limited capacity to engage with the politics of class, gender and culture and how both message and medium serve processes of social reproduction.

5. 'Transdisciplinarity' (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 35), in the language of complexity theory, is used to signal both an approach and an attitude of mind that compels disciplinary border-crossing in the interest of sharing knowledge accumulation and seeking to effect more enlightened social and educational change. It flags a desire to 'step outside the limiting frames and methods of phenomenon-specific disciplines', and:

a research attitude in which it is understood that the members of a research team arrive with different disciplinary backgrounds and often-different research agendas, yet are sufficiently informed about one another's perspectives and motivations to be able to work together as a collective. (Davis & Sumara, 2008, p. 35)

6. [A]xiological cosmologies involve the “moral charging” of practices and beliefs - through a process of axiological condensation. This process, I argue, creates relations between actors and their practices that are more mediated than standpoint theories but which, nonetheless, emphasise the attributes of knowers as key to legitimacy within the field (Maton, forthcoming)

... ‘A ‘cosmology’ is what makes one system of ideas sexy and another not so hot. More formally, a cosmology is a constitutive feature of social fields that underlies the ways practices and actors are differentially valued. Every social field has a cosmology, though its nature varies between fields and may change over time. In fields like the natural sciences, cosmologies tend to be primarily epistemological and the ‘sex appeal’ of theories is typically (though not always or solely) related to their comparative explanatory power. In fields like sociology and Education, cosmologies currently tend to be more axiological and theories are valued according to their moral or political worth’ (Maton, forthcoming).

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