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Stepping through the Daylight Gate: compassionate spaces for learning in higher education.

*Soon it would be dusk: the liminal hour – the Daylight Gate.
He did not want to step through the light into whatever lay beyond the light.
(Winterson, 2012:3)*

This paper is concerned with troubling emotions felt or aroused in all aspects of academic practice, including teaching, learning, research and relationships. It discusses the emergent processes of a research group whose multi-disciplinary interests coalesce around discomfort, disturbance and difficulty in the processes of higher education. We talk about what happened in the space when we explored the liminal landscapes of troubling knowledge. The paper draws upon social, philosophical and psychodynamic perspectives on emotions (Boler, 1999; Pitt and Britzman, 2003) and Shotwell's (2011) epistemology of 'knowing otherwise'. In this paper, we discuss ways in which we created and worked with the permissive and loose space of our collaborative pedagogical research group. In this compassionate learning atmosphere, we shared stories of 'troubled' academic work. Through this paper, we seek to contribute to a critical understanding of troubling emotions and the work of compassion in higher education. We do this by exploring their educative value in different learning spaces, and by sharing the sense of quiet hope that has enriched our everyday lives.

Introduction

How do academics learn to recognise and respond effectively to the often unexpected and troubling feelings aroused through processes of education? To what extent do current policies and practices of training and induction into

teaching in higher education prepare us for more unpredictable aspects of teaching and learning, and the disturbance that can surface? Exploring emotional dimensions of teaching and, in particular, responding to negative affect are at the heart of this piece of writing. The paper seeks to illustrate how a group of HE staff attempted to co-facilitate support for one another, in the context of addressing disturbance and difficulty experienced in academic practices. The paper sets out to convey how insight, compassion and mutual support unfolded through the group processes of a collaborative research project on dangerous knowledge.

The concept of liminality, a threshold of uncertainty and ambiguity, is central to the work of the paper and we communicate some of the characteristics of the liminal spaces that emerged in the group processes as we experienced them. We draw on social, philosophical and psychodynamic perspectives on the emotions to inform the analysis. We theorise affective aspects of the everyday epistemic events of sharing and communicating ideas to each other, events whose entangled and intra-personal nature is not always deemed worthy of attention, as if they were straightforward and uncomplicated exchanges. Our aim is to contribute towards a better understanding of the affective dimensions of higher education, and to show how certain group processes can develop the work of compassion, discussed in more detail below, to provide a supportive framework for tutors to explore negative affect, so that it becomes educative.

The paper begins by giving some background on the pedagogic research project in which the ideas here originate. It proceeds to present the theoretical and conceptual framework of the paper. Characteristics of liminality are investigated in three sections of the paper, dealing firstly with physical and metaphorical aspects; secondly with relational-emotional aspects; and thirdly with epistemic aspects of liminality. These analysis and discussion sections of the paper are followed by conclusions, where we highlight the work of compassion. The features of education that we are concerned with in this paper are not easy to convey and we have chosen at times to adopt expressive and poetic forms of language in the paper, in the attempt to do justice both to the complexity of the processes experienced, and the struggle to articulate them.

Background – researching difficult, disturbing and dangerous knowledge

Knowledge can present a sense of danger when certain ideas are difficult to communicate or grasp; when subject matter is sensitive or taboo; when we experience unexpected emotions; when life outside the classroom follows us into the classroom, when group dynamics become problematic. Higher education discourse often oversimplifies teaching and minimises the trouble involved in acquiring knowledge, unless packaged as 'teaching controversial issues'.

The Dangerous Knowledge project began with a small and tentative pilot study, initiated by two academics (Joanna Haynes and Tony Brown) with a common interest in the emotional aspects of education. Over several years they had shared anecdotes of emotional disturbances in their teaching, curious about the sense of danger that these events seemed to create, and noticing how differently academic colleagues responded to these events. Following ethical approval for the study, fellow academics were invited to join a small group, where they could elect to relate an episode in their academic practice to the others, with a view to shared exploration of difficulty. Detailed information was provided to invitees and rules for engagement carefully put in place to safeguard participants.

What was our Dangerous Knowledge project doing through its invitation to respond to the question: has your work as an academic ever felt dangerous, difficult or disturbing? From the outset, this question was broached in a tentative way. We took the time for each account to be heard and explored. These stories were hugely variable and compelling: fears aroused by students being put in precarious work placements; the death of a student and the absences and avoidances that followed; the sense of danger teaching particular topics in a politically repressive country; outbursts of outrage at perceived misrepresentation of social identity; expressions of love by a student for tutor. Soon a core group became self-propelling, mustering resources to review a wider literature and to collect further accounts from other academics. Sometimes stories sprang from recent experience, perhaps of dilemmas in research, meetings with colleagues, tricky teaching situations or awkward moments in supervision of students on placement. Many surfaced from buried memories of past university employments. These accounts came into being in part through negotiations of meaning around the terminology of dangerous, difficult and/or disturbing knowledge. Beyond the work of the research meetings, members of the research group would often be asked: what exactly do you mean by dangerous knowledge? Our answers often came in the form of an example, rather than a definition. As group members we have continued to engage in ongoing exploration, and to talk

about unfinished analyses of these collected stories, wondering how best to communicate their richness, how to do justice to the affective and ethical complexity of this contemporary academic work. It has been a slow burn and unfolding research project. The research participants benefited from a space, provided by the research group and not available elsewhere, in which to support one another and to share and theorise these issues. The work of compassion here was characterised by listening, laughter, intimacy, uncertainty, spontaneity, solidarity, a kind of permissiveness: a legitimisation of interests and an in-between space for those taking part.

This particular paper emerges from conversations between two members of the group about these characteristics of our research, in the attempt to communicate a deeper sense of this unfamiliar, risky and enlightening space and to make the case for its continuation.

Relational education, uncertainty and the work of compassion

After the quotation from Winterson cited above, stepping through the daylight gate expresses imaginary and felt crossings of thresholds, liminal spaces: transitions, border-moments, ruptures and buffetings (which might be anxious and/or excited). These appear as fluid possibilities for movement, both figurative and literal. Researching these liminal landscapes is fascinating but also tricky, even when their educative value is recognised. These landscapes of upheaval and suspense, with ‘clouds of unknowing’, are part of our academic lives, multiple, omnipresent, and inevitable.

One landscape we linger in is the threshold between philosophy and psychoanalysis (Cooper et al, 1989): one of us a philosopher, the other a counsellor by training; both feminists. This threshold not only evades expulsion of negative affect, but embraces it. It is a wandering we stay with, and whose movement we trace and follow. This is not mere toleration. It is the very threshold that constitutes what we call education. As Judith Butler puts it: *‘I think that the full expunging of negativity from life is a beautiful fancy, and I can certainly understand why some people want it. But I find it to be on the manic side; it disavows difficulty and loss* (in Bell, 2010: 150).

A recurring difficulty in our lives as academics is the strain of the performative. Performativity reaches into the heart of our relationships in the academy: in the classroom, in our meetings and in our pastoral roles with students. The breeding of disconnections through seeming disassociated managerial realities is experienced, for example, through the continuous rise in demands

via emails or the restructuring of workloads, regardless of the capacity of those of us juggling the fall out. The punishing pace of the juggernaut of incessant change generates a mania all of its own which deeply undermines compassion and intimacy. The growing workloads, demands to give a little more, the threat to jobs and departments, reduce our capacity to sustain ourselves and our working relationships, to care for ourselves and one another, to care for the academic project. In this paper, we pause to reflect on the ways in which our Dangerous Knowledge project provided us with space to care for, care about, and to take care of (Held, 2005) each other's experiences in the academy. We argue that this helps to address the disconnections of performativity, through attending more closely to the affective aspects of our work. This is the work of compassion, as discussed by Vanden Eynde (2004); and Lilius, et al (2008) who acknowledge the complex and tri-partite nature of it; whereby it is not enough to notice and recognise the distress and disturbance in another, or to show an empathy or sympathy towards the other, but it requires an action that has at its heart an effort to ease the troubling affect. It demands we take note and bring to the fore a recognition of difficulty, loss and what it is to be human, particularly in sites and regimes which can seem to '*... reduce human action to a constellation of terms such as 'performance', 'competence', 'doing' and 'skill' ...and to deprive human being of human being.*' (Barnett, 1994: 178)

We start from the position that education is a relational process (see for example Brown, in Gibson & Haynes, 2009). We believe it is in the very nature of education to invite transgressions and to solicit resistance. Yet rarely does it make spaces in which to identify, process, or sit with the myriad of conflicting emotions such encounters provoke. In her book *After Education*, Deborah Britzman discusses Freud's notion of the 'impossibility of education' and, referring to teachers, 'the impossible professions'. This 'impossibility' signals the excess and distress which results when the qualities of trying to learn and to teach (or to research), namely the desire to persuade or transform the self and the other, meet with uncertainty, resistance and the unknown (Britzman, 2003:15). Heybach discusses Britzman's (2000b:200) assertion that education has yet to '*grapple with a theory of knowledge that can analyse fractures, profound social violence, decisions of disregard, and how from such devastations, psychological significance can be made*' (Heybach, 2012:26). Elsewhere Britzman (2000:43) recognizes and locates difficult knowledge in the affective realm, a 'borderline' of thought and emotion. The affective realm is always relational and reflexive. Enosh and Ben-Ari (2016: 583)

suggest that reflexivity involves co-creation within liminal spaces ‘emanating from contemplative processes of researchers, participants, and/or within encounters.’ We would further suggest the work of compassion, through the gestures of emotional support and resulting sense of connection between one another, helps us to face the difficult, without being overwhelmed.

Landscapes of Liminality

In the course of our Dangerous Knowledge research, the emergence of co-constructed and plural landscapes of liminality has provided us with rich new knowledge, and the restless excitement of communicating such tricky and enigmatic stuff. These liminal landscapes are thresholds: pivotal moments or sharp points, emotional uncoverings. They create permissive holding grounds where disturbance and difficulty can be both realised and acknowledged. They also indicate a crisis of sorts, brought about by the effort to re-present such difficult knowledge (Pitt and Britzman, 2003).

In our attempt to articulate both the work of compassion and the epistemic nature of troubling-knowing-knowledge-that-troubles, we propose a ‘trinity’ of liminal landscapes: the first pertains to physical and metaphorical in-between spaces; the second to emotional and relational borderlands; the third to elusive fragments of implicit understanding. These aspects of liminality are all intra-related and work together to comprise the multi-dimensional character of the research. Here these aspects are gently prized apart, for the purposes of sense making.

Physical and Metaphorical in-between Spaces

Space and place are often used interchangeably, but in pausing to consider them more deeply, Agnew (2001: 2) offers a distinction in possible meanings. Space: ‘*first, a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space and ... second is a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space.*’ Something symbolic happened in the translation of lived experiences for us, at once researchers *and* research participants. The project provided a place within the working space to share stories, but also in which to identify with, and become, a compassionate research collective. This was manifest in stepping into literal spaces, beyond the designated research interview and meeting rooms. Small exchanges took place in lifts, corridors, staircases, landings, areas next to photocopiers and kettles. Casual meetings in such in-between spaces provided for further recollections and connections, other tales of disturbance; or sometimes to try out interpretations of the

term 'dangerous knowledge'. Whenever we presented the project at conferences, one or two people would seek us out quietly outside the presentation rooms, or a little later, just in passing, in an in-between space, to offer experiences of troubling knowledge. Resisting the performative drive in such moments was to occupy this space: to pause, to listen and to connect.

In their research on the spatiality of counselling, Bondi and Fewell (2003) propose various considerations of the spatio-relational-processes occurring through our research, and which provoked an undoing of *'dichotomous conceptualizations of space in favour of an understanding of space as simultaneously real, imagined, metaphorical, material, symbolic and embodied'* (p544). In the sharing of tales, we experienced and observed a reciprocal double-process of re-collection and voicing, in speech and in body. The stories did not lie intact and waiting within us, they emerged within the space of the group, the breathing bodies that also constituted the space: the gazes, the pauses, the tensions. The dynamic narration of individual accounts grew out of what was allowed, what was desired and made possible. These felt interior-exteriorisations incorporated the responses of group members and opened up new spaces of knowing, with wider views and a more varied landscape of insights. It enabled, as Enosh and Ben-Ari (2016:580) also discuss, a space in which to move in and out of experiences, *'either by reliving them or stepping outside [them] and adopting an observer's position'*. It was evident that the project opened a particular metaphorical, yet powerfully embodied space in which it was possible for knowing to be realised. As Lilius, et al (2008) identified as well, compassion can enable a process of finding positive meaning and/or positive emotions in the sharing of senses made.

There was also a kind of spatial liberation between what Bondi & Fewell (2003:528) refer to as *'... ideas about positions, boundaries and spaces to which practitioners appeal simultaneously invoke and disrupt binary distinctions between 'real, material and concrete space' and 'non-real, imagined and symbolic space'*. In their consideration of the 'space' provided in a counselling session, they go on to discuss the significance of the crossing of spatio-temporal boundaries. This is something we noted, too, in our research encounters. There was a clearly demarcated space provided for 'caring about' and exploring troubling knowledge/events; a time and place free from disturbance of the literal kind; a relatively safe, inquisitive and confidential space with fellow practitioners outside of 'normal' working practices. Bondi and Fewell (2003:537) describe a space, *'with spatio-temporal boundaries, [which] mark a separation between a realm of ordinary everyday life, and another realm in which deeply private anxieties and concerns can be addressed.'*

The 'daylight gate', a figurative device suggesting something very concrete, is a semblant¹, a whimsical metaphor for a crossing into places, where colours become more individuated in the light and/or darker places. In our research, these steps often led into the more marginalised spaces of emotional and bodily knowing that we discuss later on.

There were, too, the processional liminal spaces in the telling of the tales, those places between thoughts and words, between pause and speech... Kennedy (1997:6) describes how '*at least in the practice of poetry, philosophy, and of real dialogue, [words] are a boundary phenomenon. Speech and writing emerge in front of thought; they meet mind in mid-air somewhere; they never know if they are finding and expressing mind, or making it.*' Sometimes, in expressing our own experiences as well as in observing people working through this 'mid-air meeting', there felt a sense of liminality in the rupture of the memory of the past coming together with the musing called up in the now. This was evoked in the space between the words and the gestures, unconsciously or knowingly used to symbolically illustrate, emphasize, fill gaps between stutters and knowing. The emerging knowledge carried us into compassionate places where quiet pools of time in which to listen sometimes brought more 'felt' permissions to explore further, and/or which disturbed newly troubled senses, as we migrated between boundaries. The project created a metaphorical space for awareness and acknowledgement of events and emotions - as the Greeks conveyed in *meta* and *phora*, to 'carry across'- to shift implicit knowledge and feelings from the liminal peripheries and undercurrents to a place of co-reflexive, embodied 'knowing'. This was not clear cut. It was not cosy illumination or catharsis. Sometimes there was new disturbance as stories surfaced, and became legitimised in the space. There could be further anger in the face of the earlier disavowal, leading to renewed uncertainty and concern. Mamchur et al. (2008: 202) talk about how the rites of separation between the old knowledge (personal positions and possible myths we have lived within) and the 'new knowledge' involves change which can be 'overwhelming', and requires the 'time to tell and listen to our stories'. It became crucial, therefore, that in the literal space of these tales being told, we each encouraged and respected participants' intuitive processes, their 'knowing otherwise' (Shotwell, 2011) in this liminal landscape, as they grappled with making new connections. The performance of the professional is often characterised by a suppression or avoidance of difficult emotion, a dispassionate side-stepping. By facing the disconnection and disassociation

¹ For Lacan, the semblant is an object of enjoyment, seductive and deceptive.

of neo-liberal management, the dangerous knowledge research project troubled such practices of containment.

Liminality of relational-emotional landscapes

'In Higher Education and scholarship, to address emotions is often a risky business – especially for feminists and others already marginalised within the hierarchy of the academy. The privileging of reason and truth prevails and is manifest in differential funding status and reputations. In this hierarchy, emotions are culturally associated with femininity, “soft” scholarship, pollution of truth, and bias. Within the hallowed halls, and within a climate that rapidly eliminates arts and humanities while science funding increases, feminist scholars in particular risk being denied tenure, at worst, as well as earning the reputation as one of the “touchy-feelie” types' (Boler, 1999: 109).

A feature of such marginalisation of emotional knowing in the academy derives from a view of emotions as emanating from and residing within contained and segregated individuals, rather than as forces of affecting relations: entangled, embodied, situated and ethical responses in the world. Boler argues for a view of *'emotions [as] collaboratively constructed and historically situated, rather than simply [...] individualised phenomenon located in the interior self'* (1999:6). She decries the absence of emotions from representations of education and calls for *'pedagogies that invoke emotions in an historicized sense'* (1999:20).

Boler (2004) suggests that the public space of education offers a singular opportunity for the recognition of emotion as part of an historicized ethics, for dialogue and difference, for privileging dissenting voices, for tracing the sources of beliefs. Through such pedagogies teachers and students can utilize their discomfort to construct new emotional understandings into ways of living with others. Boler proposes the emotions as a primary site of social control and resistance.

These stories of difficult and disturbing knowledge that emerged through our project aroused high degrees of emotional responses and levels of discomfort at times with these emotions. Yet it was the permissiveness of the space, perhaps following the protection of confidential boundaries (agreed at the outset), that helped generate the recognition, and expression of this range of anger, dismay, vulnerability, uncertainty, fear, and shame to be realised. Shame provoked great discomfort and required time for us to come to face and 'know' it, to find the sharp point between feeling shame and

naming it as shame. The work of compassion here was in the holding of the space for the avowal of difficult emotion.

Some writers choose to use the term 'affect' in lieu of emotion, perhaps to avoid the kind of segregated interiorisation to which Boler refers and the resultant discourse of (unwanted) dis-closure (e.g. the classroom is not the place – troubled emotions need to be taken elsewhere: to family, friends or therapy). In her investigation of what knowing is implicit in negative affect, philosopher Alexis Shotwell provides us with a means to prevent entrapment in 'therapyising' and to navigate the precarious discourse of admissible and inadmissible feelings. Shotwell expresses doubt about the terms guilt and shame to describe the range of inarticulate feelings that express our responses to troubling knowledge. She proposes the term negative affect (2011:73) and argues that this is *'a good thing when it is both an appropriate response to loathsome social relations and provides a spur or a method for transforming those social relations'* (2011:74). She points to the value of negative affect in providing a 'switch point' that *'... can provide a gap in practice; it can stop the conceptual habits we comfortably use to navigate the world. It has a disruptive function'* (Shotwell, 2011:90). Shotwell suggests that shame, for example, signals a need for change in the world, for ethical and political transformation. She proposes that *'this kind of transformation happens in terms of implicit understanding, particularly our socially situated, embodied, affective interaction with the world'* (2011:97).

In our research project we felt a sense of affirmation and liberation in reading Shotwell's (2011: 90) summation, *'... thinking about shame is useful because of its inarticulate character. Shame is hard to enunciate because there is some shame attached to feeling shame...'* This 'inarticulate' emotional landscape became a site of evocation and a powerful place for compassionate work; a space in which we could mutually encourage the summoning of troubling encounters. When raising emotionally saturated memories, when disclosing events in our professional lives rarely shared with colleagues, we needed to travel to a permissive and hospitable landscape *'to express things that are often not easy to express'... or 'think the unthinkable or say the unspeakable'... entailing movement across spatial as well as [professional] and personal boundaries'* (Bondi and Fewell, 2003:536). Without allowing for the discomfort of the waiting space, the space for ambivalence and unease, a more permissive space could not have been inhabited, and the colour of the work would have faded to a dull hue rather than the vibrant palette it produced. McIlwain (2009:14) argues that emotions are an *'intuition pump'* and without regularly exercising their full range we fail to lay down vivid

recollections of our life experiences, we live 'palely'. We encountered a new emotional landscape demanding that we resist what McIlwain found: that so often research seems to insist on dispassionate regulation of the emotions, minimising or dismissing them as '*disturbances in the logical landscape,*' rather than embracing them as vital sources of understanding. These troubling emotions were, indeed, the '*disturbance,*' infusing our memories with embodied resonances. These were the '*vivid*' testimonies of lived experiences, shared with passion in a hospitable space.

Liminal landscapes of implicit understanding

Much of the knowledge generated by the project evades our capture and grasp in the propositional forms to which we have become so accustomed in academic writing. Working with Shotwell's illuminating epistemic term '*implicit understanding,*' the cumulative effect of collecting, sharing and analysing stories, and the responses our project evoked, seemed to begin to breach this sense of elusiveness. It did so in the way that keeping a dream diary can appear to transgress the '*membrane*' of conscious and unconscious mindworkings, unsettling the sense that these borderlines are secure and unmoveable (see for example Macleod-Johnstone, 2013).

In our workplace, since we initiated our project, we notice that our research term '*dangerous knowledge*' is often used as a kind of shorthand and a currency. In using this term, colleagues increasingly make connections between our project and their experiences, often with a sense of recognition and excitement. They insert the term into everyday conversations with us, finding further examples of ways in which the daily work of academics provokes disturbance, of varying intensities. These anecdotes are offered like gifts, joinings-in to an ongoing dialogue. '*Dangerous knowledge*' gives body to our felt precarity of academic life, employee position and the entire '*project*' of the academy, in a time of increasing uncertainty and performativity. Paradoxically, it has given us a degree of confidence, not just in validating our affective experiences, but also through our naming of them.

Playing and talking with this notion of Dangerous Knowledge '*currency*' has proved fruitful. It can work in so many ways: for example, in a monetary sense – to get a '*purchase*' on such knowledge; to value it; to make the experiences countable. We toy with the electrical use of current – dis/charging emotions or energising our understanding; offering switchpoints for change. Dangerous Knowledge currency can bridge the circuitry of social, political and

intra-personal undercurrents – making audible, visible and sensate the often unspoken and taboo.

In the liminal landscapes of implicit understanding, Dangerous Knowledge provides a rich currency for analysis. Our approach to this has been open and tentative – each of us homing in on themes that particularly resonate. It is difficult to say what the stories we shared in our research group have explicitly in common, but an implicit methodology of ‘family resemblance’ has operated, and it suggests to us that the currency of Dangerous Knowledge holds its value *across* sector borders. For example, we gave a presentation of our research to a group of US high school teachers, all attending a doctoral study class at a university in New Jersey. Our presentation included a fragment of data shared in our research group by a male teacher educator. He had been recounting an episode of teaching practice supervision with a troubled student: *‘There were 3 or 4 of her friends in the kitchen, and we drank tea together before going to her room, where I spent 20-30 minutes talking with her in private, but with the door open’*. Following our presentation, a male teacher from the doctoral study class came forward quietly, yet evocatively, to act out how, in his own high school setting, if he had to pick something up off the classroom floor near female- students-dressed-in-skirts, he would bend down, with his head turned oddly upwards and eyes averted. The implication of this enactment, and the highly charged commentary, was of his sense of a climate of suspicion of male teachers. He had recognised something in the tiny, shared fragment of dangerous knowledge, and realised something previously unspoken about his own situation. Again, the naming of such a thing as ‘dangerous knowledge’, and the sharing of it, created a chain reaction: it allowed him to acknowledge and express the disturbance it had caused.

The powerful resonance of anecdotes in qualitative research has been documented. It is their refusal to be laid to rest, that leads to events becoming transformed into research material (see for example Haynes, 2007; and Haynes & Murriss, 2011). Van Manen (1997) argues that anecdotes form a counterweight to theoretical abstraction and are a valuable implement for uncovering meanings: *‘anecdotes possess a certain pragmatic thrust. They force us to search out the relation between living and thinking, between situation and reflection’* (Van Manen, 1997:119).

What we have found helpful in exploring this particular aspect of liminality – this inarticulate but palpable sense of resonance, recognition or family resemblance in the diverse shared stories of academic life - is Shotwell’s account of implicit understanding (2011): the idea that we might ‘know’

something, but not yet realise it, or be able to express it fully. As novelist Margaret Atwood writes in *Oryx and Crake*. ‘*He stood back and to the side. All the hairs on his arms were standing up. We understand more than we know*’ (2009:384). It is in the compassionate care for these stories, and in each other listening to them, in giving gifts of time and space (Haynes, 2013), that the implicit understanding becomes recognised.

These kinds of knowing are in movement and flaky, rather than fixed. They take different forms: embodied, situated, affective, tacit, intuitive, and might be at odds with self-beliefs, values and propositional knowledge, hence the upheaval often provoked. The moments of disequilibrium (Haynes & Murriss, 2011) provoked in particular by experiences of negative affect, provide the sharp points into which we can lean (Shotwell, 2011). The space of feeling the sharp points helps to ‘give name to the nameless’ and serves as space of illumination (Lorde, 2006, cited in Shotwell, 2011). Under this light, she suggests, we might be able to scrutinise our lives to imagine the changes we could bring about, giving rise to quiet hope. The exploration of affect, provides a space in which ideas can grow. Affect is important in marking what is salient for us, and what we need to attend to. The exploration of feelings ‘*make possible the conception of difficult-to-think propositional knowledge [and] previously inaccessible ideas become accessible*’ (Shotwell, 2011:27).

Conclusions

In the analysis and discussion in this paper, we have characterised three major aspects of liminal thresholds of understanding, and how these ‘in-between’ spaces provided for the work of compassion among a group of academics. We have noted how the work of the group spilled out of the formal meeting times and provided other spaces and a language to make sense of, and stay with the trouble of the disturbing knowledge increasingly associated with academic work. What emerged from our conversations together in the research group was a profound respect for the work of compassion in forging liminal border crossings for *human* beings working out human difficulties, and for the frequent positive emotion and sense of recognition and connection it brought. For the powerful place of time and space it encouraged in which to hear one another, and to create permissive encounters which evoked buried ‘knowing’ and avowed emotional expression and understanding. The project continues and this gives a testimony to the call for more ways in which as colleagues we can gather and explore together our stories of difficult and troubling knowledge and implicit understanding. Yet our experience has been that such implicit forms of understanding are often regarded with suspicion and devalued, in academic settings. Yet we argue that they play a

critical role in our coming to make sense of things, and being able to act on them, particularly when it comes to troublesome knowledge. Having identified these dimensions of liminality, we conclude that the liminal is not only an in-between space or a border-crossing towards propositional knowledge. It is a space and means, through the work of compassion, of knowing in itself, to be lived with, acted upon, and integrated into an expanded vocabulary of knowing, perhaps better described by Shotwell's (2011: 125-155) elaboration of the term 'sensuous knowledge'. It was the work of compassion, at the difficult threshold of the liminal spaces, that enabled such vital relations and rich learning to take place.

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