Gendered Bodies / Lecturing Spaces: Teaching Sissy Jupe in Cyberspace

Barbara Brook

Feminist writing on teaching and learning has privileged embodied, personal interaction. Moves towards mass and distance education, with an associated espousal of new technologies of delivery, appear to decentre, or even erase, the teacher and point towards a redundancy of the teaching body. This paper draws on some recent feminist, and other, theorising of new technologies to signal the importance of engaging with these issues and their implications for future feminist pedagogies. It builds on some empirical research undertaken by the writer into university student perceptions of 'real time/space' classrooms. The specific context is the contemporary Australian university system. 'Sissy Jupe' of the subtitle appears in the 19th-century novel *Hard Times* (Charles Dickens): she represents-- here as in the novel--the principle of an embodied divergent imagination in the face of convergent utilitarian education. And, for this paper, the subject of a feminist pedagogy.

Current educational moves towards a technologically-delivered, distance(d) higher education, a virtual university, offer a radical challenge to humanist pedagogy—and thus, by association, to much western-feminist pedagogy. This challenge is neither unambiguously hostile nor immediately hospitable to feminist concerns. Its potential for reconstituting the learning/teaching nexus and thus, refiguring the bodies of knowledge, must be addressed by feminist teachers if it is not to become yet another frontier land disguising its phallocentricity as neutrality.

Western-feminist pedagogy, with many of its origins in consciousness-raising, has emphasised the primacy of classroom interactions and an experience grounded in 'our bodies, ourselves'. The assimilation of highly theorised feminist research into the academy has tended to produce a 'body of knowledge' which reproduces the traditional university's Descartian erasure of the carnal body in favour of the mind. Vicki Kirby offers an evocative vignette of the ways in which such an erasure can be reproduced in the context of a feminist-intellectual anxiety to disavow a link to 'nature', an anxiety which, she suggests, rests on an unarticulated sense of danger:

'What does the nominative [and disavowed] "biological or anatomical body" actually refer to?…a question to this effect(…)was met with a certain nervous incomprehension(…)As if to emphasize the sheer absurdity of my question she pinched herself and commented, "Well, I certainly don't mean *this* body"'(1997:70)

Much of the qualitative research we undertook into student perceptions of lecturing bodies, in 'real time/space', indicated that indeed there are risks to female, and other 'dissident', bodies calling attention to themselves in the lecturing spaces.[1]

How then to return to 'this body' without also resurrecting the danger of becoming identical to 'this body'? Lois McNay offers an important caveat: ' Although a notion of the body is central to a feminist understanding of the oppression of women, it needs to be thought through carefully if what is regarded as patriarchal logic…is to be subverted and not compounded' (1991:128). One return to the body can be seen in current pedagogic interests in the 'erotics' of pedagogy: a theme heralded by Jane Gallop's (1995) edited collection *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation.* Some more recent developments might be seen, cynically, as in part a self-justificatory exercise on the part of teachers aware that economic-rationalist university managements seem quite eager to remove messy, disruptive teaching and learning bodies from real time and space, and to substitute non-litigious, profit-making curricular input and access points. Distance(d) education as a financial cost-saver seems to privilege information-into-mind processes that remove social and cultural supports and, with them, the possibility of tangential and chance interchanges. While this

distancing may seem intrinsic to the new electronic media, it can be countered in a number of ways: as it was, for example in print-based distance learning programs like the British Open University supplementary 'embodied' study groups; and by the development of a reflexive curriculum that demands a context for the information and its delivery.[2]

One of the major problems, however, is that while there is an encouragement to develop cost-effective mass delivery systems, there is relatively little consideration of an innovative adaptation and development of curriculum for the new media. Further, the technical expertise for really innovative rethinking of both form and content is lacking. Janet Murray's discussion, in the specific context of interactive design, is pertinent here: she suggests that the field is ham-strung by a restriction to narrow, specific content-based disciplinary frameworks that operate in isolation. Whereas, '(t)he healthiest programs will be those that draw equally on the empirical bent of engineers and social scientists and on the cultural knowledge and expressiveness of humanists and artists…We do not need designers who can produce more attractive interfaces with the same formats of communication. We need designers who can rethink the processes of communication, exploiting the capacity of the digital environment to be more responsive to human needs' (1999:41). Murray goes on to warn of both 'the promises and the perils', suggesting that these possibilities 'make it all the more compelling that we address the task of educating the professionals who will shape the digital landscape in our collective human image' (41). I would want to break with Murray here and substitute the idea of 'diverse human images' for that 'collective' singular human: from a feminist perspective, collective *human* images have tended to look very masculine and of a very specific hegemonic cultural type.

Some non-feminist critiques of electronic distance education and the 'virtual university' seem to experience vertigo when confronted by a space *apparently* devoid of conventional social boundaries. Peter Taylor(1996), for example, regrets the ways in which the new spaces take the brakes off social inertia, and thus present the teacher/curriculum-deliverer with problems of authority. This contrasts with the way that physical spaces of the real-time university combine with its traditional discourses to provide a material base for the teaching identity. Taylor does not acknowledge that this identity is inflected with gender and other cultural markers. Terry Flew's recent discussion suggests that appeals such as Taylor's rest on a nostalgia out of step with the existing, changed nature of the Australian university system: 'The fact that about 40 per cent of Australian university students are now part-time or distance-education students has proved difficult for many to grasp.'(1999:36) Flew, while acknowledging some dangers in a wholesale espousal of 'techno-boosterism', suggests not only an elitism at the heart of some academics' refusal to respond to the changing student body, but also an espousal of 'personality as vocation' (38). This latter is an issue which some feminist critics of the (male) charismatics of critical pedagogy have addressed but which remains something which feminist teachers need to keep constantly in mind concerning our own practice both in its manifestation of the 'Miss Jean Brodie' syndrome and in the more insidious helping mode. The latter is summed up in Jennifer Gore's (1990) title where the apparently innocently charitable query: ' What can we do for you!' is reemphasised to stress the implied power relations:' What can "we" do for "you"?'

Boundary-riding as practised by Taylor may seem quaintly phallocentric. The fluid decentring of a previously 'socially inert' arena is, for many feminists and others who might seem to be, in Liz Stanley's terms, just 'passing' in the academy, less a cause for concern than an opportunity for 'infecting' the bodies of knowledge with previously oppositional and marginalised understandings. The metaphor of the physical body as infectable, and thus corruptible, by viruses, for some theorists connotes a welcome dis-ease in which each new shaping, rather than signalling physical decay and death, enacts a metamorphosis: the ultimate assimilation, by eating, of the old by the new (cf. Palmer,1996; Sofia,1994). This trope of incorporation as a form of cannibalism is one that recurs throughout much contemporary discussion of pedagogies and technologies (eg. Deutscher,1994; Morse,1994). Re-inscription of a negative metaphor for political purposes can back-fire. The seductiveness of disease is probably as much a luxury of the physically robust as thinness is a luxury of the well-fed. The image of an organic infection—unlike Donna Haraway's more aseptic version of cyborg woman as a break in the circuitry—seems to buy into all those hoary old associations of monstrous women. Do feminists need to be perceived as the Typhoid Mary of the cyber age?

Such appropriations of the negative term and subsequent reinvestment in it have strong links to the liminal realm of the abject and monstrous. As Mary Shelley foreshadowed and as Zoe Sofia describes within her own particular contemporary feminist perspective, the generative power of myths and monsters is in excess of their creators—potentially in excess of the binary systems of gendered representation in which they originate. Sofia both disowns and exploits the disease metaphor as phallic construction:

> One way for women to imaginatively enter the big body of technology is the 'micro' option, for example by identifying with a virus that can penetrate and corrupt the data banks of Big Daddy Mainframe. (1994:99)

Such an entry is enabled, for Sofia, by the ways in which, she rather optimistically claims, the omnivorous appetite of contemporary '(h)igh-tech masculine maternity' has already incorporated into itself aspects of (m)other and has, therefore, already transformed or troubled the phallocentric symbolism of its authority. Sofia sounds the by-now-familiar warning that resounds through much feminist theory: that, while there may be a strong appeal in the notion of transgression, of 'abject female excess' as means of lubricating 'the dry hermetic circuits', the abject and excessive is not inevitably subversive. Sofia's analysis of the potential and limitation for feminist engagements with new technologies in general, might also be usefully applied to feminist and other 'emancipatory'[3] educational projects that engage with these technologies.

In terms of potentials for feminist teaching, Sofia's discussion is suggestive because it adds to the nexus of female body/pleasure/technologies the further dimension of myth-making—a potential that Sofia herself has addressed elsewhere (Sofia,1993). (Murray also advocates an inclusion of myth, most notably the mythology of the labyrinth.) While, myth-making may hold out the best possibilities for subversive excess it is, not coincidentally, resolutely expelled from the disciplining information-into-mind processing that Taylor and others suggest is becoming --or rather, is returning as--the preferred educational paradigm. If the monster, the mythical, is always in excess of its boundaries then work must be done by such a paradigm to expel it, and thus confirm it as the Other of a system characterised by control and convergence. There is, for example, not a lot of myth-making going on in the curriculum packages that organise communication teaching across the Australian TAFE sector. In the juxtaposition of imagination and myth with information-into-mind processes there appears to be an uncanny late-twentieth-century return to the battle between romanticism and utilitarianism represented in Dickens' *Hard Times*: although the site is changed from chalkboard and classroom to keyboard and monitor. Now as then, the oppositions are gendered. Where does the subject of feminist pedagogy, the feminist learner sit in this dialectical battle?

Dickens, in the 1850s, embodies 'Fancy' as the girl-child of the circus, Sissy Jupe, who must be disciplined or expelled by utilitarian 'Fact' as embodied in the schoolmaster and his employer, the industrialist. Dickens couches the contest in a secularised ethical discourse, whereby 'Fancy' stands in for 'Soul' and 'Fact' for 'Evil'. Although Dickens substitutes a sentimental romantic aesthetics for theology, the text depended for much of its original rhetorical impact on an assumed shared Christian-cultural reference point. Peter Taylor, in the 1990s, suggests that an acceleration toward new technologies of learning that eradicate the physical body of the teacher, and learner, colludes with the increasing fragmentation of, supposedly homogenous, community values. He illustrates this with an anecdote about a shopper in the costume-jewelry section of a department store who can't decide between a plain cross and one with 'the little man on it'. For Taylor the shopper's lack of knowledge of the religious symbolism of the cross/crucifix, is paradigmatic of the ways in which symbolic authority is now decentered. It is a neat example, and of a genre à la Allan Bloom that many teachers have perfected as part of collegiate practice—often with the accompanying nostalgia for that never-never-land classroom where a whole group of students could…read *Paradise Lost* without footnotes; recite the key events leading up to World War I…(insert your own cultural icon)! Taylor sets up a clear 'us' and 'them' in the retelling of the anecdote: the 'we' who recognise the central symbols of a shared Christian heritage, an age-group, a certain class-base that distinguishes 'us' from the market place. (What can "we" do for "you"?) I think, too, that there is a gender inflection to Taylor's story : both sales assistant and customer *could* be male, but how do you visualise them on first reading? How are they embodied?

What is the problem that Taylor uses this anecdote to illustrate? It is one by no means restricted to, but made more pressing by, the move toward 'information-into-mind' processing. New educational technologies,

particularly when employed in globalised and globalising systems, have the potential to expose and explode the phallacy of a shared body of knowledge and of a shared symbolic system on which an integrated, uniform package of information can be based. Taylor's anecdote exposes a central dilemma for 'emancipatory' intellectuals of legitimating and defending our own value system when the system that we have set up in opposition to is, itself, exposed –often by our own efforts-- as fragmented and indeed far from homogenous. The maintenance of boundaries of privileged information and symbolism as cultural markers, whether from traditionally left or right position, makes it easier to ignore or discount one's own blindspots. As Kirby's example of the feminist academic's reluctance to acknowledge her 'biological' body illustrates, feminists are not all-seeing: we have plenty of blindspots of our own. For Taylor, the decentring of cultural symbolism and referents poses a different challenge to teachers within the new domains of delivery. These teachers are called on, in their physical absence, to develop an authority which will have a self-evident high value equivalent to, or at least be a contender with, the physical-institutional values of the embodied academic. That is, while the supposedly shared symbolic systems traditionally addressed in the teaching content may be at variance with the actual heterogeneity of students' cultural and symbolic referents, the physical site of the university and the interactions of its bodies help to invest that knowledge and its purveyors with authority. However, in a distance-learning context, not only are the bodily presences of the teachers removed as signifiers but so also is the material presence of the institution which contributes to the social meanings of those bodies. This disembodiment, according to Taylor, evacuates the information of its lived ethical and cultural context. This becomes clearer if we consider the analysis that Mary Douglas offers of the symbiosis of social body and physical body:

> The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived(…)There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of body so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (Douglas [*Natural Symbols*, 1970] cited in Balsamo,1996:65)

But how far is Taylor justified in placing such emphasis on the different media of distance education? To take a mundane example: when we read in the material absence of the writer, are the words totally emptied of their origins in a social body? Without engaging at this point in debates about the 'death of the author' or its gendered implications, I would suggest that in many of our traditional reading experiences we do, at least partially, 'embody' their authors and also, importantly, through the material medium of the book or journal are able to place them within a particular discourse both geographically and historically. Is the global surfing of texts different? I suspect it is. One of the issues for a material-feminist teacher is how to impart a sense of the real-world framing of a text when it is downloaded by students, and has no clear origin in real time or space. At a mundane, but important, level: when older texts in English are downloaded, the standard generic masculine is recirculated, often without a benchmark date.

To argue that the text then becomes learner-centred argues that knowledges and different levels of understanding and interpretation are unimportant, and at its extreme dissolves difference into a humpty-dumpty world where everything means anything. It would indeed make the teacher redundant. However, this is an extreme speculation. What we are dealing with in the present is an economic move to create curriculum packages with very little encouragement to explore the philosophy or differences of the media in which they are offered.

The current higher education policies in Australia are rapidly expanding entry and refiguring the student as the lifelong (mass) consumer of such packages. This becomes a serious challenge to some teachers whose identity is constructed around the capacity, as a sort of freedom fighter within the academy, to enable 'disadvantaged' or 'marginalised' students to access and participate in high culture: what Flew dismissively calls 'personality as a vocation' and equates with the arts and humanities. In this construction, the academy's central values are kept intact and the teacher has *both* institutional and an assumed, oppositional, moral authority. The problems of maintaining such a position-- and its masculine-gendering-- have been widely and variously analysed as they raise issues for feminist academic practice (see eg. Ellsworth; Gore; Lewis) and they continue to demand some resolution. The problems of what, as a feminist teacher, you do with authority, how you get it, and whether you want it, are allied questions that exercise feminist-pedagogical inquiry. In a recent collection (Stanley,1997), both English feminist social-work

academic, Sue Wise, and Australian feminist academic, Gina Mercer, explore problems of authority and value faced by particular embodied women:

> Typically I experience students as having simultaneously high expectations of me and little respect for me(…)Elitism, here, is something that students have striven for, and to arrive at university only to find that your 'own kind' are there before you in positions of authority is an extreme disappointment. How much more gratifying to find a world that is different and elitist, but one that you too can now join.(Wise,1997:127)

In Douglas' terms, Wise's physical body contradicts these students' expectations of the social body of the academic as Other to their own, with a concomitant undermining of her as 'the academic'. Wise speaks within the specific, highly refined discourse of British class relations but her comments have resonance for many of the mature--aged students in the Australian higher education system—and for their teachers. If the trend to a distancing of the physical bodies of student and teacher continues, how will this affect the issues of authority and value that Wise discusses and will this be for better or worse in terms of feminist politics? This poses a feminist question with an emphasis different from Taylor's: if the erasure from the new informations of the physical body and its accompanying/defining social body were indeed possible, could this enable the production of new, diverse and divergent, 'slimy' authorities that can slide between the fixed exchange of meanings? What would such lubricants look like? But this, of course, begs the question posed earlier, of just how inclusive and polymorphous cyberspace can be.

The answer to this will depend on the degree to which you entertain new technologies as radically different, dangerous but open spaces or read therm as more of the same old patriarchal story translated into pixels. The majority of current discussions within feminism(s) tends to fall into polar positions that seem as clearly drawn as Dickens' 'Fact' and 'Fancy'. Carol A. Stabile(1995) suggests that the apparent polarities of 'technophobia' and 'technophilia', reflect identical underlying assumptions based on economic privilege. Susan Hawthorne(1996) argues that many of the theorists enthusing about the openness of virtual reality et al. ignore the masculinist/phallocentric origins of the technologies, and their production within a consumer market where the ideal customer occupies the very specific 'social body' of the '10-year-old boy from Idaho"(Hawrthorne,1996: 8, fn.11). This raises a question for curriculum design: in developing a distance(d) education in whatever form, who is the 'ideal customer' and what constitutes her/his social body? Does it have a class, ethnicity, locality , a set of bodily abilities? Conversely, how far is this a different problem from that raised by any curriculum development originating in a specific cultural and institutional setting? Is social inertia really bound to the bricks (or sandstone) and mortar of the physical locale? What about the cultural inertia of a communication system where most of the search engines and a majority of the most easily accessible material defaults to the United States?

Katherine Hayles(1993) addresses 'The Seductions of Cyberspace', with specific attention to disembodiment and virtual reality. One of her emphases is on the way in which the cybernaut's desire to leave the (physical) body is contradictorily one of both escape and control. Hayles offers a timely reminder to those travelling into theories of cyberspace, of Frederic Jameson's useful 'double hermeneutic of suspicion and revelation'(174). Hayles suspiciously points out that the fantasy of escape held out by virtual reality is one that will remain fantastic for anyone without the economic resources to become a consumer of technology. On the side of revelation, she speculates on the potentials for dissolving the boundaries of social bodies and their codings of difference:

> Cyberspace represents a powerful challenge to the customary construction of the body's boundaries, opening them to transformative configurations that always bear the trace of the Other. The resulting disorientation can function as a wedge to destabilise presuppositions about self and Other. (Hayles,1994:187)

If we can play with different gender identities and so one, as enthusiasts like Sherry Turkle suggest, will this undo notions of a stable identity and lead to a proliferation of multiple selves released from the oppressions of cultural markers? There are a number of issues one can raise here: apart from a vulgar inclination to simply say, 'In your dreams'. Enthusiasts for the fluid spaces of the media like Catherine Lumby suggest that the same boundary collapse that Taylor fears must be intrinsically transgressive for the good: the promiscuity of new media flows has its own logic ' whereby images exceed, incorporate or reverse the

values that are presumed to reside within them in a patriarchal order' (p.15). That is, the media spaces have an independent logic. For Lumby, feminism 'has to come to terms with feminism's own incorporation in media space, and also revise its attempts to critique the media as if "from without"'(p.15). One modest application of new technologies in education seems to be as a more encyclopaedic extension of the social studies textbook. Interactive CD Roms addressing multiculturalism, for example, are offered as a way of teaching the value of diversity, as a recent piece of celebratory journalism argued (Carruthers 1999). With this CD Rom and its ilk, the objective seems to be a direct translation of social desiderata from the CD into the 'real time' of the classroom and beyond, and while the possibility of this is arguable, there is no material difference between this and the illustrated textbook. That is, the medium itself does not seem to offer an autonomous and different logic, in Lumby's terms.

However, in more sophisticated areas of new technology, one of the attractions of cyberspace and virtual reality seems to be the possibility of leaving behind what *Neuromancer* and cyber aficionados call 'the meat'. It is here, surely, that feminist warning bells start ringing. Paying attention to Lois McNay's caveat, a feminist engagement with issues of the body must surely start to ask how far it benefits women to enter a space in which embodiment is disavowed and elided with disease, flesh, mortality. One of Turkle's female interviewees on the delights of cyberspace celebrates its further erasure of her real-life anorexic body (1995:215). In terms of the educational possibilities of transferring the dissolving boundaries of identity in cyberspace to 'real time', critics like Lisa Nakamura point out the limits of 'identity tourism'. The apparent 'choice' of different identities is often from a western perspective whereby the pleasure in trying to 'pass' as Other is premised on a stable, and privileged real-life identity. She argues that this is yet another form of neo-colonialism; in one of the most popular play sites or MUDs '(a)default 'whiteness' covers the entire social space…race is 'whited out' in the name of cybersocial hygiene'(Nakamura:1995). The implications for educational use of these spaces are clear: it is utopian to imagine that the medium creates a logic totally independent of the social formations which organise its creators and 'inhabitants'.

In pragmatic terms, how can this analysis be used to address some feminist pedagogic concerns? One way is to speculate on how a collective enterprise of teachers might develop a highly reflexive curriculum design for all education, including distance education, that comments on its own processes rather than taking the delivery system as given. Such developments might engage students explicitly, even at a distance, in questions of authority and value—with the proviso that the students' responses might not be at all what the teachers had in mind. Boundaries can still be maintained by negotiated curriculum and learning contracts that are not all teacher directed but mutually agreed. More radically, and bearing in mind critiques like those of Nakamura, the possibilities described by Hayles of shaking up self/Other definitions could be explored. However, before becoming too carried away with these revelatory possibilities it is important to retain some perspective regarding the economic and political contexts in which proposed developments must take place. How can such changes and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning be effected within the specific higher educational environments of the present which seem to owe more to Gradgrind than the circus?

I am not unconditionally optimistic that there can be a sustained successful feminist –or any other--'infection' of the higher education system in the current political climate. Terry Flew, in his discussion of the 'virtual university', tries to disentangle the different webs of discourse producing this climate. He points, among other things, to the ways in which distance, mass higher education, detached from the physical locale, is potentially anti-elitist. However, he also warns of a dependency on technology for the education running counter to this, if individual capacity to buy the technology limits its distribution. (Examples of this can already be seen in the private school system where some schools are routinely demanding that enrolled children are provided with individual laptops). However, I also think it is important to be constantly reflective, even if this may lead to abandoning some of the most cherished feminist-pedagogic beliefs about the teaching and finding new ways to let Sissy Jupe dance through the mainframe. Can we use our skills in different ways, still engage with some of the embodiments of teaching and act within these new times to reconsider the gendered and other cultural inflections of terms such as 'authority' on which our practice and identity has been based?

Notes

1. This long-term action-research and extended work is reported in Brook 1991;1992;1999.
2. A useful site for information on innovative approaches to distance education is Wellspring at http://wellspring.isinj.com/
3. For discussion of 'emancipatory teaching' see Brook 1994.

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