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The sound of higher education: sensuous epistemologies and the mess of knowing[1]

Alison Phipps*
University of Glasgow, UK

The soundscape of higher education is changing. The changes reflect an age of managerialism and an age of uncertainty. These changes call on us to give up on some of the ways we have understood knowledge in the past and prompt us to find news ways of recognizing and understanding the complexities facing higher education research. This paper explores the possibilities opened up by perceptions of higher education gained through the senses, especially through the auditory sense. Taking the case of modern languages, it traces some of the contours of the soundscape of higher education—its grief and its diversity.

Introduction

One of the perspectives on higher education to which I turn for inspiration, and even for idealism, is the vision presented by Ben Okri in *Astonishing the Gods*. This is writing known to many, but, like all good writing, it bears repetition:

> The universities were places for self-reflection, places for the highest education in life. Everyone taught everyone else. All were teachers, all were students. The sages listened more than they talked; and when they talked it was to ask questions that would engage endless generations in profound and perpetual discovery. The universities and the academies were also places where people sat and meditated and absorbed knowledge from the silence. Research was a permanent activity, and all were researchers and appliers of the fruits of research. The purpose was to discover the hidden unifying laws of all things, to deepen the spirit, to make more profound the sensitivities of the individual to the universe, and to become more creative. (Okri, 1995, pp. 66–67)

In our quest for new perspectives on higher education we regularly ask the question *how*. *How* is it that research into higher education in the twenty-first century can best

*Arts, Humanities and Education, University of Glasgow, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow G3 6NH, Scotland. Email: a.phipps@arts.gla.ac.uk

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continue to thrive and to be prized for its rigour as well as its utility? This is a question of praxis, in Freirean terms, of how the verbalism and activism of research may come together as work (Freire, 1970, p. 68). From this founding *how* further *hows* follow. In tradition of the Trinity, three *hows* are identified, or 'pinpointed' to be accurate, by the Society for Research into Higher Education (www.srhe.ac.uk). The word 'pinpointed'—a word taken from the practice of precision bombing, giving the task a sense of attack, of military campaign.

- *How* is contemporary research into higher education being reshaped by new theoretical and analytical perspectives and insights?
- *How* is higher education research influencing higher education practices and policies?
- *How* can we best safeguard and strengthen future capacity for research into higher education?

Surely one of these strategies must hit the mark? The words used in these questions sound both familiar and different. Some are indeed military in their metaphorical usage, others come from the business domain, though they usually arrived there on a route-march from military language camps. When we say certain words we feel their plosive, even their explosive effect in our mouths: *pinpoint, perspective, practice, policy*. Other words slip and slide around, with their sinuous 's's'—*reshaping, safeguarding, strengthening* … then seducing. I am a poet. The music of words, their power to evoke and change the world, matters to me immensely. The words, I also note, I always note this, are in English.

Such questions make some fundamental assumptions. The assumptions are as follows:

1. That higher education research *is* thriving, *is* useful and *is* rigorous.
2. That higher education research *is* being reshaped by new perspectives and insights.
3. That higher education research *is* influencing policy and practice.
4. That there are discernable ways of safeguarding 'capacity' for the future.

These are all assumptions, we might say, about the current 'sound-ness' of higher education. But, for me, when I take soundings myself along these lines, more questions are raised. These questions prompt me, as a modern linguist—a disciplined academic—to consider the idea of *the sound of higher education,* of orality, speaking, listening, of the changing soundscapes of our higher education worlds. Such questions provoke a shift from *perspectives*, from the solely visual, to *perceptions* and thus to additional, more broadly sensory modes of knowing.

At times, when I am preparing to walk in the mountains of Scotland I'll read the Scottish Mountaineering Club guide and consider the routes. 'This makes for some airy scrambling, but the rock is sound'—the guide says. 'Airy scrambling' for those of us who use these guides is potentially code for, 'you'll be hanging on for dear life over a sheer drop of several hundred feet at least'. The notion of sound knowledge has been taken over by the technicality of 'management speak'—sound is the metaphor for management—sound management practices and principles and strategies are often anything but sound in the sense of trustworthy, in an ethical sense. They often disrespect human beings and their particularities, for the good of 'sound management' and they do so because they believe in the completeness of the packaged nature of what they are proposing. Sound management

is management in the indicative mood, not the subjunctive mood—it is management which is sure of itself, of its narratives and admits no doubt. There is no room in 'sound management' for those who do not have a sure head for heights; for 'airy scrambling'.

Sound rock is rock you can trust, if you move well with your body and are responsible for yourself and for others, the rock will not fail you.

This is not the case with higher education research, or at least not from where I stand. My own position, like many of those in my field of higher education is one of clinging on and hoping that the rock is indeed sound, that the guides are right, and that there have not been too many climate events to dislodge the ground beneath me catastrophically. For from where I stand—or perhaps I should say, from where I cling on—I don't really *hear* higher education research or feel its potential. This is not because it is absent but because in the war of attrition that is raging in particular, in modern languages in the universities at present, other sounds are far louder and they stifle such research.

From where I stand the kinds of research, and the kinds of research into higher education which tell us that other worlds are possible are precisely those which are of little use to whatever is understood by safeguarding, strengthening, even—heaven forbid—'capacity building'. What dominate are money and managerialism. Don't get me wrong, these are not necessarily bad in and of themselves, but in their current guise, in the field of modern languages, they are catastrophic. So, when I talk with my colleagues in the field the dominant sound is not that of higher education research and what it can do to safeguard, strengthen and reshape, the dominant sound is that of fear for the future, of having been pinpointed, of being already under attack.

The soundscape in modern languages

What we hear in the soundscape of modern languages is that 'Languages don't matter'; 'Languages are skills' (difficult/menial); 'Languages will get you jobs'; 'Languages are in crisis'; 'English is the global language'; 'Language labour is cheap'; 'Some languages should be sacrificed for the greater good'. The research modern linguists do—those few who are brave enough to have a go at doing research which they have consistently been told is educational and therefore of no research value for the UK Research Assessment Exercise—now chases evidence to support the claims in the list above which may help them safeguard the discipline for the future. Consequently, research into higher education scrambles to produce large doom and gloom surveys, to issue press releases and pamphlets which suggest there are seven hundred reasons to learn a foreign language or to trumpet modern linguists as being at the top of the employment league tables (Gallagher-Brett, 2004).

We can hear the desperation in this work. We know other truths about it. Seven hundred is just too many, and in actual fact we know what kinds of jobs our students do during their studies and for a while after graduation; they have jobs in bars, and teaching English as a foreign language because very, very few employers actually *pay* for languages, and many of our students' 'first destinations' are in temporary jobs, abroad. But still we try and make these other 'truths'. And so the research into higher education in modern languages becomes performative (Austin, 1975). It creates the very worlds we are attempting to understand. It changes the soundscapes. From being professionals able to

twist our tongues around the most delightful of words—*olio d'oliva, Gemütlichkeit, les correspondences*—we have become professionals speaking the same dominant, colonizing language as absolutely everyone else.

> It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They become part of you while changing you. Beware of the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world. (Okri, 1997, p. 120)

Our world in modern languages is an altered world and it is more than my hunch that this is the same for other areas of higher education and its research. I know this to be the case if the disciplines are those, as in my own institution, which go on a journey with students in such a way as to show that other worlds are possible: history of art, classics, archaeology, languages, anthropology.

And the sounds of this altered world are those, primarily, of grief:

> We've a little time before the meeting begins. I don't know my colleague well, but she looks tired, we all do these days, and I ask how she is. She begins to tell me she is fine, but her eyes fill with tears and the real story breaks through. She can't do this any more. They have increased her hours, closed down her most successful course, taken away her dignity, told her that the language she speaks with such love and inspiration, is worthless here. And the room is full of the sound of weeping.

In the face of the grief, and it is palpable and often overwhelming to those of us who listen to it regularly and who are part of its tears too, we witness the constant selective deafness of management systems and higher education research which closes its ears to this sound in pursuit of capacity, strength, safeguarding. There is a great irony here, for again and again we are told to self-censor: 'On no account must this sound reach the auditors'.

This sound of grief is not the sound I wanted to hear.

Methodological nostalgia

I'd like to indulge in a little methodological nostalgia and remember some sounds with you that were part of my common experience of higher education and which have vanished or are disappearing.

On summer days, sitting in my office, I would open the window and through it I would hear the sound from the building next door, where the windows were also open and where the music practice rooms were in use. I would hear music, worked at, practised, scales, arpeggios, a cello giving me haunting melody. The sound was comforting, Romantic even, somehow connecting me in a sensory fashion to the work of the university as a body of scholars and to the work we all share, as researchers—that of practice, discipline, commitment, improvement, sounding. Recently, I noticed that I no longer heard the music in this way. That music did not permeate my world as it had done. Perhaps the practice rooms were needed for offices. This sound had died.

An annual event in my department—as in the majority of modern language departments—was the staging of the annual play performed in the language, in German or

French, Spanish, Italian. These were ritual times for the department with students and staff learning lines, rehearsing, clothes being begged, borrowed and even stolen for the purpose of the performance. The university theatre would be booked and for two or three nights everyone—students and staff, and former students, and former staff—would gather in the audience to watch the play. Sounds of German would be spoken all around the department in refreshing, amusing ways. At the ends of classes, students would suddenly break into song, or recite snatches of learned lines. And there would be laughter. Always laughter. The social bonding and the intensity of the language experience were marked by sounds, intense, concentrated and happy. But then came the refurbishment grant and the lottery funds and the bidding process for the wonderful new theatre space, and at £1000 a night—even with a subsidy—it was no longer possible to hire the space—German theatre doesn't pay—the figures didn't add up, time spent on it by staff might detract from the research assessment exercise. The German play is now a thing of the past.

These are just two examples of sounds which have vanished, which I miss. And the soundscapes of higher education have evolved. Now I hear my colleagues speak of 'consumers', 'joined up thinking', of 'thinking outside the box', 'product', they 'roll it out' with 'budgets', 'strategic realignment', 'models', 'North America', 'Asia', 'overseas markets', 'long-term strategy.' In many of our degree programmes we also teach this unpoetic language, we help whole new generations to construct the world in these terms. As a language it expresses other contexts, other lived realities to our own. It may have come in to our disciplines from other sources, but we have been the ones translating it—or some of us have. It is hard to resist. It is the language we are now instructed to speak and the language we are evaluated in, through and by. It is the legitimated perspective in higher education, transplanted from other contexts, industry, accountancy, military, colonialism.

These are not the only perspectives available to us. And for higher education to thrive, as with any culture or activity at any stage in history, others will always be necessary. And to find these we will need to teach other languages, translate from other places, use other discourses. And we can only do this if we learn to listen to other sounds.

This is not something our structures in the English-speaking world of higher education are very good at, at present. Indeed for all their internationalizing agendas other languages, other ways of living in this world and expressing the possibilities of life in this world, are invisible in universities' 'strategic initiatives'. To read any strategic document for the 'internationalization' of higher education (a code word meaning get international postgraduate students and bring their fees here, but without their bodies if possible) you really would believe that the whole world speaks English—all the time. It does not. But the internationalization project is not cast as a plurilingual project. Indeed, the main problem, I keep being told, with students who pay large fees who do not have English as a mother tongue, is 'their poor English'—rather than *our* feeble understandings of the dynamics of languages in education. Our strategic and policy level understanding of languages is woefully simplistic and fundamentally flawed. Yet, no area of research is untouched by translation and interculturality. There can be no new life in our disciplines, no new perspectives on higher education without tuning in to different ways of speaking. We live and thrive in translated worlds.

Equally problematic is the sound of our thought. Thinking sounds like the soft turn of a page in a quiet, still library, where people go to think. Thinking also sounds like the animated, engaged hum of conversation with others who share common research interests. But this too is a nostalgic thought, for the quiet of libraries is now rarely a real quiet and most scholars flee from campus, to go to other places to think, home, the quiet coach on the train, to archives, or to conferences where they can come together and think together, in the same way as they can in the coffee shops and bars that are off campus. The sounds of silence and the sounds of thinking conversations have slipped from the buildings that used to house them. With no *common* rooms how can there be *common* thought, or a *commons* of thought on campus.

Reshaping the how

So perhaps we need to reshape the how. How did we get to this place? How do we move beyond it? How do we stop the crying? How might we flourish? How do we safeguard? How is what we say, to be heard? Perhaps we need to change the tenor and timbre and the texture of the sounds.

> For the question is always
> how
> out of the chances and changes
> to select
> the features of real significance
> so as to make
> of the welter
> a world that will last
> and how to order
> the signs and the symbols
> so they will continue
> to form new patterns
> developing into new harmonic wholes
> so to keep life alive
> in complexity and complicity
> with all of being
> there is only poetry.
> (Kenneth White, 'Wandering the coast', in White, 2003)[2]

How to proceed?

How do we do this? How do we change the how? This is a question of methodology. The response in much higher education research is to evaluate, audit and to measure. The new regime of full economic costing and its hungry calls for 'metrics' is one example. The website at the University of Glasgow, which provides information to staff on how to count their full economic cost contains the following quotation from Lord Kelvin, one of the institution's most famous sons and whose experiment is still continuing in the senate rooms of the university, in more ways than just the one that sits on the window sill in a glass case. Lord Kelvin says:

> I often say that when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind. (www.gla.ac.uk/staff/fulleconomiccost/)

Can we change the *how* by auditing, or must we recover an older idea of auditing as listening? The question *how* becomes a question of method, but not in the narrow ways in which we conceive of methodology and teach it as procedure on our methodology courses, neatly dividing theory from practice, quantitative research from qualitative. In his recent book, *After method,* John Law asks the rhetorical question 'what happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy. The answer … is that it tends to make a mess of it' (Law, 2004, p. 1).

'Meagre knowledge' in Kelvin's terms, is rich knowledge for Law, and he maintains that in order to know something of the complexity of social life—of which higher education is of course a part, we need to work in different ways: if the world is complex and messy, then we are going to have to give up on simplicities. We will need to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual to or unknown in social science. We should attend to the hungers, tastes, pains of our bodies. We need to listen to our sensibilities, private emotions, passions, intuitions, fears, griefs or betrayals. We need to find other ways of knowing the world (Law, 2004).

New perspectives on higher education research don't necessarily mean finding new angles from which to see the same thing. New perspectives may need new ways of seeing—or, to put it more accurately, new ways of perceiving.

> More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. … In our culture the predominance of the look over the smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality. (Irigaray, interviewed in Hans & Lapouge, 1978, p. 50)

The anthropologist of perception, Tim Ingold, maintains that the critique of the gaze and of sight that has pervaded much recent theoretical writing is not so much expressing a problem with sight as a problem with modernity (Ingold, 2000). Nonetheless if new perspectives need different ways of perceiving then ours is once again a Renaissance task. It will need us to mess with perspective—with the science of sight, and this, I am proposing here, involves a shift—from the gaze to other senses, one which may bring knowing into the body, from being detached and 'out there' and objective. This is a shift into sensuous epistemologies.

Sound sounds

Perhaps our *how* might be reshaped in the way I initially approached it, critically: a critical sound is after all a 'sound sound'. And ours is the task—in the arts, humanities and social sciences at least, of teaching critical awareness, even criticality. In conferences we hear critical voices. Much of our funding for research is aimed at measuring the size of our problems … and sometimes, though rarely enough, even suggesting solutions. Our task in higher education research is work on and in the university on behalf of society.

Sometimes we do this critically. Surely the critical sound will help us thrive and have influence?

But, according to White and to Bauman, criticist discourse does not get us anywhere fast.

> Criticist discourse tends to become a process in itself, integrated into the system. The result is a vast accumulation of studies and statistics that give the impression of being valid and up-to-date, but get nobody anywhere and tend to simply clutter up the space for manoeuvring. (White, 2004, p. 15)

> The point is, however, that contemporary society has given to the 'hospitality of critique' an entirely new sense and has invented a way to accommodate critical thought and action while remaining immune to the consequences of that accommodation, and so emerging unaffected and unscathed—reinforced rather than weakened—from the tests and trials of this open house policy. (Bauman, 2000, p. 23)

Barnett proposes critical being as a way out of this impasse (Barnett, 1997), but it is still an impasse. It is still a critical sound—offering judgement, not offering newness, if we follow the etymology. What this leads to, I would contend, is *Ontological deafness*—we become deafened beings: our ability to listen is affected by the critical sounds around us. Our speech falls on deaf ears, or disenchants. And so, we are not heard.

> Numa sociedade desencantade, o re-encantamento do universidade pode ser uma das vias para simbolizar o futuro. [In a disenchanted society, the reenchantment of the university could be a way of symbolizing the future.] (Santos, 1994, p. 200)

A glimmer of hope: the idea of re-enchantment, of a re-enchantment of the university. It is perhaps dangerous to suggest that the university was ever actually enchanted at all, that an age existed when all was well. My sense is that it both was and wasn't a place of enchantment in the past; that enchantment is not a fixed state, but a way of working with words, at the textures of memory and perception to meld a future that may enchant what has never been enchanted, and re-enchanted where the spell has been broken. Ritzer (Ritzer, 2005) writes of this, as does Santos (Santos, 1994), as a process of de-rationalization, surprise and spontaneity, but without any sense of how.

How do we re enchant higher education?

> Up end the rain stick and what happens next
> Is a music that you would never have known
> To listen for. In a cactus stalk. (Heaney, 'The rain stick', in Heaney, 1998)[3]

In his wonderful poem of surprise, music, enchantment, possibility, Heaney tells of the most unexpected of objects—a rain stick—being the one that brings the most amazing music into being. This poem has served me as a symbol of the search for life, for rain in the desert, in the scorched earth of languages in higher education. I've been working for the past couple of years on 'up ending' the rain stick—trying to find out what the world sounds like when we turn it upside down. In a language landscape stricken by drought, I have sought the rains.

> I think I must be entirely mistaken. I must be in the wrong place. I'm here to enrol in a six-week course in tourist Portuguese. The place is mobbed. We are queuing up outside the

> classroom door. It's like being in a vortex of the over 60s. All is chatter and excitement and umbrellas. The contrast to my day job could not be more marked.

So, this is me, on the margins, after hours. Sometimes, when the course is over, or when the rooms get double booked we are in my front room, or other people's flats, or giving up our holidays to learn another language, and doing so in the company of our tutors—the real heroines of the language story—excellent, hourly paid women.

And what I have found, in these plurilingual spaces and encounters, on the edges of higher education, is that languages are alive and well, on holiday. The question I've been asking, given the overwhelming odds against languages, is why are these people bothering? Why bother to learn to ask for a cup of coffee? When the world speaks English and when this aspect of language learning is the most maligned by modern language professionals and by those who teach languages in mainstream higher education, why do people bother? Yet, here we all are, trying hard, getting somewhere, going on holiday, meeting people, in their language, having a go, smiling, laughing and consequently sustaining something of the social miracle, against all the odds. 'Meeting, greeting and eating', says Williams (Williams, 2000), are what maintain the social bond of neighbourliness, even, he argues, of charity, in the older sense of the word.

We know that there are around 3000 students enrolled in full time, mainstream language degree programmes across higher education in the UK (Footitt, 2005). We've never bothered to count the 'tourist language learners'—the wee wifies from Milngavie, young Gavin from Castlemilk who comes in by bus because he wants to go to Portugal and doesn't want to be bad mannered when he is there. Estimates suggest that there are probably around 20,000 enrolled in university language courses after hours, with aspirations towards the virtues of courtesy (Footitt, 2005).

One of the many surprising world-up-side-down, cactus-stalk-like aspects of my findings relates to orality and literacy. Much work has been done on creating distinctions between the West and the Rest in terms of literate cultures and oral cultures. The anthropologist Walter Ong was one of those who suggested this division in the 1980s.

> Orality is not an ideal, and never was. … Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible. (Ong, 1982, p. 172)

And … I have never encountered or heard of a language learner in higher education who does not want to achieve oral fluency as soon as possible.

> It's been freezing in the classroom and is freezing cold outside. We are all moaning about the ice, journeys home, defrosting, We learn how to say we are cold in the first minutes of the class—*tenho frigo*—and the class finishes a few minutes early because we all say we are too cold to think. We are learning to ask to buy tickets so we can travel by train or bus to certain tourist destinations. We talk together about Portugal fondly, dreaming of beaches, clean trains, punctuality, warmth, holidays. We catch up with each other's knowledge with names of cities, phrases already successfully used to get around. As we pronounce the names of destinations in Portuguese we stop feeling the cold quite so intensely and enjoy the sensation that the naming brings and in learning to say we'd like a single ticket to Cascais.
>
> *Queria um bilhete a Lisboa, Cascais, Faro, Évoar, Ēstoril*

Queria reservar um bilhete para Sintra na 6 Feira, 12 de dezembro

Simples ou de ida e volta?

Every now and then we use up the words we have. We aren't doing badly. We are sitting back-to-back so that we can't see each other and we are now trying to order tickets. We both have our books on our laps and we keep having to pause to check phrases and look at our notes, but we are managing to speak to each other as if we are on the phone, trying to book rail tickets to these lovely, warming places. But every now and then our words just run out. We just don't have the words we need to say the things to each other that will make it feel as though this is an exchange which is smooth, socially smooth, that makes it OK for us to be communicating as human beings. I want to say to my partner—'It's your turn now'—she wants to say the same to me. We get frustrated eventually and ask the tutor. Just using the one small phrase gives us a sense of relief, when we say it.

Language—oral language—is embodied. It is not detached from us it is in us, changing us. To get to a place of embodiment I, and those with me in the language class, have had to make ourselves look and sound and even feel frustrated, stupid even humiliated. Our method of learning has been that of Law's *After method* … pains, sensations, memories, emotions, smells, sounds. We have been struggling all the time with not just how to speak, but how to be heard, how to converse, how to be understood—how to listen and how to speak. We have been working painfully hard to learn to *play* a language, to body-forth conversation. It has involved humility even humiliation.

Which returns us to the question of how?

How is higher education research to thrive, to be prized for rigour, to safeguard the future, to be heard? *How to make of the welter a world that will last …?*

From where I stand, from my experience of up-ending the rain stick, I have some tentative pointers, even principles. These may be found in the etymology and definitions of the word 'sound'. For sound means both health or soundness, safety or security (*sund*) and it involves changing the patterns of the air (*son*).

What gets heard?

What gets heard is what changes the patterns of the air. What gets heard is vibrancy, vitality, pain and agony. It is not heard each time in the same way, each circumstance, each moment modifies the tonality, the sound, as it strains to be heard.

Sounds of grief
Sounds of laughter
Sounds of singing
Sounds of life
Sounds of conversation
… of listening and speaking.
Sounds of poetic thought.

In order to change the patterns of the air we learn, in the way we have always done, from those who *enchant*, who change the sound, who work with the malleable textures of

perception … poets, translators, magicians, teachers, languagers, storytellers. We become enchanters. We work with what we've got. 'There are no secrets' (Brook, 1993) states the theatre director Peter Brook in discussing his ways of working with the textures of perception and the shapes of the human body and its speech.

And how? The answer is in the up-ending, again—not in the newness—not in new perspectives on higher education, but in the oldness that is in the very newness. For there is nothing new under the sun, as Wisdom says in Ecclesiastes, and all new insights, new moments, new beginnings are in a constant dialogue with the past, and are working with and through the radical resources of nostalgia. For although we have been taught, perhaps rightly, to be wary of nostalgia, it is none the less a strong, affirming force for change. It points us to our discontents, it returns to us that which has been taken away, it gives us a touching place for memories which may reach in to us, in new ways, for different times (Tannock, 1995).

> Up end the stick again. What happens next
> Is undiminished for having happened once,
> Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
> Who cares if all the music that transpires
> Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
> (Heaney, 'The rain stick', in Heaney, 1998)

How do we safeguard, strengthen and continually stay alert, fresh, open to new worlds and new ways of being?

We work (again) *from* nostalgia, pain and grief. We begin (again) *with* the mess and mistakes, in the midst of things. We listen, (again) … and again … *for* stories, which we can tell and which will be heard … which may alter our worlds. We change our speech to create new conversations … to make music transpire. For speech, says Merleau-Ponty is a kind of singing (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). We 'up end' the world and attune ourselves to its sounds, again. This is the work we do each of us in our own particular corner of higher education. It is local work. It is the work we are given to do, embodying new ways of being, and we tackle it in such a way as to change the patterns of the air. To do this, is to genuinely think, to think in ways which may thrive. In Heidegger's terms it is to *speak* poetically, through the sounds of poetic thought: 'The speech of genuine thinking is by nature poetic. The voice of thought must be poetic, because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of being' (Heidegger, 1971, p. 72).

Why poetic?

This work, I am suggesting here, is a work to unconceal our being and this will not be an easy task. And yet, in the interstices of research in higher education, in the human gatherings, it is work which goes on in the relationships between people, in the moments of remembrance and insight, in the confessions and in the laughter, in the sharing of stories of grief and hope. The language of such sharing is often at variance with the safer unpoetic speech of our discursive environments. It is a more vulnerable mode of speech, keen to be heard, keen in its content, creative and dwelling in that space of dialogue and thought where poetry may begin to occur.

> The form of the poem … is crucial to poetry's power to do the things which will always be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values. (Heaney, 1998, p. 467)

You are like a rich man entering heaven through the ear of a raindrop
Listen now again.

Notes

1. This paper was originally presented as the closing keynote lecture given at the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education, 15 December 2005, at the University of Edinburgh. I am grateful to the organizers for their kind invitation and to my audience for their generous response.
2. 'Wandering the Coast' is from *Open World, Collected Poems,* 1960–2000 by Kenneth White and is reproduced by permission of Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd (www.birlinn.co.uk).
3. Excerpts from 'The Rain Stick' by Seamus Heaney from *Opened Ground* (1998, p. 395). Every effort has been made to obtain permission from the publisher, Faber & Faber, for material cited in this article.

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Alison Phipps teaches at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Her books include *Acting identities* (2000), *Contemporary German cultural studies* (Ed., 2002), *Modern languages: learning and teaching in an intercultural field* (2004) with Mike Gonzalez, *Critical pedagogy: political approaches to languages and intercultural communication* (Ed., 2004) with Manuela Guilherme and *Tourism and intercultural exchange* (2005) with Gavin Jack and *Learning the arts of linguistic survival: languaging, tourism, life,* Channel View, 2007.

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