JULIAN STERN

Bishop Grosseteste University
ORCID: 0000-0003-4126-0100

Beyond the lonely university – how universities can be alone together

Introduction

I have been in education all my life, as a school student, university student, school teacher and university academic. I have a broadly communitarian view of education – the school as a community of a particular kind, and the university as a community of communities (Stern, 2018b). For the last decade or more, I have been working on the role of solitude in community, being 'alone together' (Macmurray, 2004, p. 169; Stern, Wałejko, 2020). This research theme, incorporating different versions of solitude, silence, and loneliness, was initiated after a child in one of my research projects (Stern, 2009) responded to a question in a surprising way. On being asked when they felt most *included*, in school, the child said it was when they were *left alone* and allowed to work on their own. Solitude is – I have come to believe – central to the character of healthy communities.

Studying solitude in education – in schools and in universities – I have come to a point when some of the lessons learnt about individual people may also be relevant to institutions. They are also relevant to whole countries, with Israel, for example, being referred to as the loneliest country in the world (Watters, 1974).

Universities can 'sit apart' from the rest of society. They can be 'ivory towers', protected and isolated from the outside world. This can be valuable. At times – and now is one of these times – the separation of universities is accompanied by a rejection by people outside higher education. This separation, this 'sitting apart', can therefore – for all its advantages – lead universities (or those in universities) to experience *loneliness*, a separation from others, a sense of rejection by others, and a sense of responsibility for that rejection – a sense of guilt or shame for being alone (Stern, 2014).

In contrast, we can think of universities being embedded in society – growing from the local society and feeding back into the rest of society. Education departments in modern universities are all-too-often looked down upon within the academy, for their 'embeddedness' in schools and other extra-mural professional contexts. Yet this is precisely how and why universities developed over the last millennium.

The two images of universities – as apart and as embedded – live alongside each other. Like individual people, a university must try to do both: live alone *and* together. This paper will describe how this is done by universities.

Universities Alone

Universities can 'sit apart' from the rest of society. They can be 'ivory towers', protected and isolated from the outside world. This can be valuable. It is good to have somewhere to go, where people can consider the deepest issues, where they can contemplate matters that others may think worthless or insignificant, where there can keep their heads in books to study long-dead and distant writers, where they can try – and sometimes fail, and sometimes manage – to be curious (Stern, 2018c), to unlock the mysteries of the universe. Irrelevant, daydreaming, unfocused: such work can be a total waste of time. And it *can* be the source of the greatest innovation. 'Each epoch dreams the one to follow' (Benjamin, 1999, p 4, quoting Michelet), and the dreaming should be able to take place in universities. The dreams are – incidentally – those of students and staff alike.

However, at times – and now is one of these times, at least in the UK – the separation of universities is accompanied by a rejection by people outside higher education. Governments may be frustrated by universities harbouring and supporting radical and 'disruptive' ideas, or spending public money on trivial matters. Intellectuals may be insulted for being out of touch with 'real life'. Not only that, but conventional university pedagogy and learning may be seen as dinosaur-like and about to become extinct, being replaced by more flexible and online learning, MOOCs and the accumulation of tiny credit-bearing units of work.

The idea of the radical, even revolutionary, university is relatively new, dating from the time of higher education expansion in the 1960s. (Perhaps there were some examples from Weimar Germany, such as the Frankfurter Schule?) Before then (or other than in such periods of radical higher education), universities were largely seen as conservative, edging towards leisure pursuits rather than radical utopian dreaming.

But whether rejected as radical or as over-leisurely, the separation, the 'sitting apart', can therefore – for all its advantages – lead universities (or those in universities) to experience *loneliness.* Loneliness is an emotion that, currently, has up to three dimensions: a separation from others, a sense of rejection by others, and a sense of responsibility for that rejection – a sense of guilt or shame for being alone, a lesson I learned from a seven-year-old. My concern for UK universities, and for those in similar situations around the world, is that separation can lead – through the second and third stages (i.e. rejection, then self-rejection) – to the lonely university.

That is not the whole story, however. There is a story of togetherness, too.

Universities Embedded

In contrast to the isolated, perhaps lonely, university, we can think instead of universities being embedded in society – growing from the local society and feeding back into the rest of society. Universities originally grew up to train people for professions – to profess, quite literally, in religious communities, and to join other professions such as medicine and the law. Such embeddedness is how universities function as public bodies or as contributing to the public good, the common good. There may be 'private' universities (and all UK universities are, legally, private – typically, limited companies with charitable status), but they, like public universities, are still contributing to the public good, training teachers, lawyers, doctors, business leaders, and more. A university experience is not *only* valuable insofar as it trains people for professions. It should be possible to gain a professional qualification without joining that profession, and yet still benefit from the university experience. But the embeddedness of universities is a central characteristic of higher education in all jurisdictions throughout history. Oddly, the 'ivory tower' view of universities only emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. This was at the time that higher education was in a period of rapid expansion and was attempting to retain (or was insulted for trying to retain) its medieval mystique.

So embeddedness is the 'default setting' for universities. Having said that, there are some within universities who cherish their separation and combine this attitude with looking down on any embedded features of their institutions. Education departments in modern universities are all-too-often looked down upon within the academy, for their 'embeddedness' in schools and other extra-mural professional contexts. Prior to the 1960s, teacher education was a form of higher education, but it was typically restricted to colleges of education, even if their qualifications were accredited (as 'external' qualifications) by established universities. At the same time as university-based education departments were being set up (from the 1960s onwards in the UK), some universities established courses for 'the general public', and the departments were often – tellingly – named 'extra-mural'[1] departments, as they reached 'beyond the walls' of the university. Yet this is precisely how and why universities developed over the last millennium.

Education as a 'discipline' (is it a discipline, or a field, and is the subject 'education' or 'education*al*'?) is still looked down upon, though, even if a greater scorn remains for fully 'extra-mural' studies. Being the subject of scorn for being embedded leaves many in university education departments *lonely*.

So, given this troubling embeddedness at the heart of universities, we are left with universities in danger of being apart from *and* in danger of being too embedded within

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[1] The departments have mostly been renamed or recast or redeployed, variously, as 'adult education' or 'continuing professional development' or 'knowledge exchange' or simply as part-time provision.

society. And both dangers can be accompanied by loneliness. What is the best way to go beyond the lonely university?

Conclusion – Beyond Loneliness

The two images of universities – as apart and as embedded – live alongside each other. My hope is that universities can be in healthy solitude at times, and not suffer from loneliness (i.e. not feel shame or guilt for their solitude), and universities can be embedded in wider society, and retain their educational purpose (Stern, 2020). If they can, in such ways, be both alone and together, they can live healthily. Like individual people, a university must try to do both: live alone *and* together. Going beyond loneliness – for universities as for people – means understanding how to develop a sense of self that is communal and that is solitary, that recognises the community of the local context and that stretches beyond that immediate context. This can be done by drawing on understandings of professing, professionalism, and professors, and drawing on extensive research on teaching (Stern, 2018c) and on research (Stern, 2016), and on solitude and loneliness more generally (Stern et al., 2022). In a longer paper, I would talk of the strength and courage needed to profess, needed to be – similarly – a professional and a professor. It is an account of personhood in community, one in which individuals are treated as ends in themselves, notwithstanding their differences and disagreements. Having a profession indicates the possibility of – the *likelihood* of – disagreement, and this is not a denial of membership of a community. Indeed, a community of people and organisations that all *agree*, is no community at all. But, as I say, that is an account for another paper. In the meantime, I can say that universities can be understood using the lens of solitude in community, living both alone and together.

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Abstract

Universities can 'sit apart' from the rest of society. They can be 'ivory towers', protected and isolated from the outside world. This can be valuable. It is good to have somewhere to go, where people can consider the deepest issues, where they can contemplate matters that others may think worthless or insignificant, where there can keep their heads in books to study long-dead and distant writers, where they can try – and sometimes fail, and sometimes manage – to unlock the mysteries of the universe. However, at times – and now is one of these times, at least in the UK – the separation of universities is accompanied by a rejection by people outside higher education. The separation, the 'sitting apart', can therefore – for all its advantages – lead universities (or those in universities) to experience *loneliness*. Loneliness is an emotion that, currently, has anything up to three dimensions: a separation from others, a sense of rejection by others, and also a sense of responsibility for that rejection – a sense of guilt or shame for being alone.

In contrast, we can think of universities being embedded in society – growing from the local society and feeding back into the rest of society. Universities originally grew up to train people for professions – to profess, quite literally, in religious communities, and to join other professions such as medicine and the law. The 'ivory tower' view of universities only emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was at the time, ironically, when higher education was in a period of rapid expansion and was attempting to retain (or was insulted for trying to retain) its medieval mystique.

Education departments in modern universities are all-too-often looked down upon within the academy, for their 'embeddedness' in schools and other extra-mural professional contexts. Yet this is precisely how and why universities developed over the last millennium. The two images of universities – as apart and as embedded – live alongside each other. My hope is that universities can be in healthy *solitude* at times, and not suffer from loneliness (i.e., at least, not feel shame or guilt for their solitude), and universities can be

embedded in wider society, and retain their educational purpose. If they can, in such ways, be both alone and together, they can live healthily, alone *and* together.

Keywords: profession, lonely, solitude, loneliness, community, university, education