

Blackfriars: A Dark Name for an Enlightening Learning Space.

Miranda Middleton

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

The historical site of Blackfriars Public School in Chippendale would appear unremarkable to most passers-by. It is, after all, just an old primary school building, now used as a teaching and learning space by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Yet to the historically trained eye, this site holds much greater meaning. Within the classroom walls of Blackfriars Public School, human reason emerged as a threat to the Church's dominance in society, a quest for human improvement and progress was embarked upon through a range of educational initiatives, and a community-based organisation was initiated by UTS to actively combat social problems. To understand how and why these developments occurred at Blackfriars, one must call into consideration the historical forces of 'the modern' and 'the postmodern'. It is only in light of these ideas that we can arrive at a true understanding of the site, and more generally an appreciation of why we learn the way we do today.

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Blackfriars Public School was built in 1884 under the orders of the newly established NSW Department of Education. To facilitate its construction, the government purchased some of the grounds of St. Benedict's Catholic Church in Blackfriars Street, Chippendale, an act that outraged many members of the Catholic Church. They perceived the school as a threat to their institution, a further means for the Department of Education to monopolise primary schooling, after the Public Instruction Act of 1880 proclaimed the cessation of government assistance to church schools. Archbishop of Sydney at the time, Patrick Moran, described the erection of the school as a cruel act of intolerance, injustice and vandalism, during his visit in September 1884. 'The State has boundless resources at hand- its grounds not limited- yet it casts its eyes on your little home of religion,' he told members of St Benedict's Church (McPhee Architects 2012, p. 31).

It is important to question why the government chose to intrude upon the Church's grounds; of all of the plots of land that were available to them, why did they decide to undertake 'the biggest school building project of the 19th century' (McPhee Architects 2012, p. 30) on this already partially-occupied site?

One of the most important global effects of modernity on religion is the loss of religion's monopoly in the "symbolic field", which is now structured by both religious and secular systems (science, philosophies, ideologies, values). Even if these systems are not antireligious or are associated with religion, their very existence favors more autonomous attitudes vis-à-vis religion. (Lambert 1999, p. 328)

The intrusive construction of Blackfriars Public School upon the grounds of St Benedict's Church - a blatant attempt to challenge the monopoly of religion in society - cannot be divorced from its historical context. By the 1890's, when the school sprang into being, modernity had established itself as a powerful intellectual movement, underpinned by the

desire for man to break with the ways of the past and use his own reason and understanding to make the world a better place. Yves Lambert (1999) postulates that the primacy of reason and autonomy in modernity gave rise to a new notion of 'truth', serving to undermine the authority and power of religious institutions. Blackfriars Public School- positioned defiantly against St Benedict's Church- can thus be seen as a symbol of the modernist campaign to resist the Church's monopoly of schools, liberate society from the clutch of religion, and give rise to autonomous reason as the primary source of truth and meaning. These modern ideas about religion still lie at the heart of today's educational system, which operates upon an increasingly secular curriculum and denies the Church a single, authoritative voice by emphasising the plurality of religious beliefs and ideologies that exist in society (Zwartz 2011).

Upon its completion in 1885, Blackfriars Public School quickly established itself as a leader in the field of innovative education practice in Australia. In 1906, the first fully equipped kindergarten in New South Wales was established at Blackfriars, under the direction of Headmistress Martha Simpson. Miss Simpson ordered the removal of the fixed desks in the classrooms and designed a more liberal teaching program based upon the principles of German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel, who in 1895 described his kindergarten as an institution for 'self-education and self-cultivation...through play, creative self-activity and spontaneous self-instruction' (Palmer 2001a, p. 96). Prior to Froebel's kindergarten, children under the age of seven did not go to school, as they were considered incapable of concentrating and developing cognitive skills.

For her courage in introducing a kindergarten at Blackfriars, Martha Simpson promptly emerged as a leading figure in the NSW education scene. In 1912, she became the first Australian school teacher to experiment with the teaching methods of Italian educator, Maria Montessori, who defined the role of schools as to release human potentialities, rather than impart knowledge (Montessori 1974), and the role of the teacher as to provide children with the nourishment needed to develop into unique individuals, rather than shape their personalities for them (Montessori 1964). In 1913, Miss Simpson visited Rome to learn the methods first-hand and upon her return, wrote in her 'Report on the Montessori Methods of Education' that based as it was on liberty, the Montessori system was well suited to 'the educational needs of a free, democratic country like Australia' (Turney 1983, p. 245). Blackfriars Public School consequently became the centre of Montessori influence in Australia (Cleverley & Lawry 1972), a site that represented a major break from the Victorian traditions of rote learning and discipline, and a shift towards a more liberating and child-focused approach to education.

Yet one cannot help but wonder what drove this zealous experimentation with new teaching methods at Blackfriars at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, the school was not alone in breaking with the past and privileging the new, as the 'New Education' movement swept throughout Australian schools and universities. Cleverley and Lawry (1972, p. 33) define 'New Education' as 'a swing away from rather barren instruction in the basic subjects, to teaching and learning concerned largely with the child, its nature and perfectibility', a description into which the liberal, child-centred methods of both Froebel and Montessori implemented at Blackfriars- fit nicely. 7 Arguably, the greater impetus for this desire to change and improve schooling- both at Blackfriars and throughout the wider scene of Australian education- was the historical force of modernity. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in 1992, identified the defining characteristic of 'the modern' as a belief that progress would emancipate humanity from ignorance and corruption, and through education in particular,

produce enlightened citizens (Usher & Edwards 1994). The modernists believed life to be ‘in transit from a primitive origin to a utopian end’ (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 33), thus saw every new development as a stepping-stone to a more perfect world.

This idea that constant change was the key to human improvement and societal progress had been gaining prominence in modern educational thought since its inception by Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant during the eighteenth century. Kant postulated that man was shackled by a ‘self-imposed immaturity’ (1784, p. 1), since he relied upon the ways of the past instead of using his own reason and intelligence to make sense of the world. Accordingly, Kant heralded the need for all regulations and institutions- the education system included- to be constantly reworked and improved in order for man to progress and aspire to perfection.

It may be that education will be constantly improved, and that each succeeding generation will advance one step towards the perfecting of mankind; for with education is involved the great secret of the perfection of human nature. (Kant 1960, p. 7)

In light of this Kantian philosophy, it is no wonder that the educational means, methods and facilities at Blackfriars Public School were in continual evolution throughout the early twentieth century. A kindergarten playground was built in 1913, an after school play centre thought to be the first of its kind in Australia- was initiated in 1918, special education classes for children with disabilities began in 1921, and the Children’s Health Lunch Cafeteria was established in 1929- a key step in the shift towards the ‘holistic’ approach to education and childcare endorsed by the schools of today (McPhee Architects 2012). This series of innovations at Blackfriars fits with Pollard’s judgement that modernity ‘consists of irreversible changes in one direction...towards improvement’ (Wright 2004, p. 3).

Perhaps the boldest ‘change’ made at Blackfriars Public School was the opening of a Correspondence School in 1924, giving children in remote areas the option to be educated outside of the traditional school environment. 300 specially trained teachers communicated with students and parents via the post, following a similar curriculum to regular Government schools. By 1933, an innovative ‘School of the Air’ had been established, whereby children in highly remote areas with infrequent postal services received lessons from the Blackfriarsbased teachers via ABC radio broadcast. Over the years, the Correspondence School came to encompass a much broader spectrum of students: any child who lived more than three miles from the nearest school, was physically or mentally disabled or was living temporarily overseas, as well as incarcerated prisoners and TAFE students. At its peak in 1959, more than 7000 pupils were enrolled at Blackfriars Correspondence School, and it had become the model upon which other nations based their own distance learning programs (McPhee Architects 2012).

But what brought forth this groundbreaking notion that children could in fact be educated outside the confines of the classroom? Victor Seidler suggests that with modernity came a conception of human action and morality that allowed all human beings to participate in society as rational agents (Edwards 1995). Thus built as it was upon the Enlightenment ideals of ‘critical reason’ and ‘humanistic individual freedom’ (Usher & Edwards 1994, p. 2), modernity can be named as the legitimating ideology behind distance education. The modernists asserted man’s capacity to use his reason and rationality for independent learning that is, without face-to-face guidance from a teacher- and encouraged society to move

‘beyond the environments that had made us, and [begin] to make ourselves’ (Wright 2004, p. 13). In more recent times, with the emergence of new technologies such as wikis, blogs and podcasts, distance education has come to operate in a multitude of forms, such as e-learning sites, online tutorials and video conferencing (Beldarrain 2007). Its inherent faith in the power of human reason has infiltrated all aspects of the contemporary pedagogical discourse, in which the student is the driving force of his or her education and the teacher is a mere facilitator of learning rather than source of knowledge (Usher & Edwards 1994).

Evidently, the ideas of the modern are crucial in understanding how and why Blackfriars Public School evolved the way it did throughout the early twentieth century. Driven by the Enlightenment objective of improving mankind, this innovative educational institution favoured reason over religion as a source of truth and meaning, and was continually trialling new teaching methods.

However the modernist faith in progress faced significant opposition in the latter half of the century, as wars raged and human rationality and perfectibility were cast into doubt. Founders of the Frankfurt School, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, began to question ‘why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, [was] sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (Moss 1999, p. 20). As such, a certain ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1994, p. 36) served to marry the postmodernists, a group of thinkers who privileged less ambitious *petits recits*, little narratives that resisted closure and totality (Palmer 2001b). In light of these grounding principles of postmodernity, we can better understand the changed use of the Blackfriars precinct from 1989 onwards, after a decline in numbers forced Blackfriars Public School to close. In 1996, the University of Technology, Sydney, purchased the site, using the heritage-listed buildings to house their new ‘Shopfront’ program- the first of its kind in any Australian university. Its initiation can be attributed to the loss of faith in the modernist metanarrative of inevitable progress, as man realised he had to step out into his community and take action if society was ever going to improve.

We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laidback pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogeneous range of lifestyles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalise and legitimate itself. (Eagleton cited in Harvey 1989, p. 9)

To use Eagleton’s terminology, Shopfront favoured action over reason, pluralism over totality, and declared its aim as to foster a ‘culture of equity, diversity, social responsibility and mutual respect’ within both the UTS and broader community (UTS Shopfront 2012). In this way, the program defied the modernist values of universality, consensus and certainty, rather accepting the ‘ineradicable plurality of the world’ (Moss 1999, p. 22) and seeking to *celebrate* difference rather than suppress it. According to Furman (1998), the postmodern community is precisely a community of difference not sameness, shaped by processes which foster among its members a sense of belonging, acceptance and safety.

Labelling itself as a ‘community research and advocacy centre’ (UTS Shopfront 2012), Shopfront undertook community-based projects to actively question societal norms and tackle issues such as racism and homophobia. One of its first projects was a 30 second television advertisement, part of the highly successful ‘Homophobia: What are you scared of?’ campaign run by the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. The campaign served to rally together members of the community in a stance against homophobic violence, and more

broadly recognise and accept 'the heterogeneous range of lifestyles' - as Eagleton puts it- that exist in our society, all with equal claims to legitimacy.

Throughout its 15 years of operation, Shopfront has completed over 600 projects and supported a vast number of under-privileged and marginalised groups in our community, such as 'Tribal Warrior Association'- the indigenous maritime training organisation based in Redfern- and 'Originality'- a local Aboriginal group of female artists. In 2005, UTS Shopfront received a National Award for Community Engagement and Teaching at Parliament House, in recognition of its commitment to serving the community. This 'responsibility for the Other', as espoused by Shopfront, is seen by Bauman as central to the postmodern mentality: 'We are, so to speak, ineluctably- existentially- moral beings: that is we are faced with the challenge of the Other, which is the challenge of responsibility for the Other' (1993, p. 1).

The Shopfront program at UTS can also be read as part of a wider shift towards a postmodern curriculum, that is, one that challenges the narrow modernist model of knowledge transmission. William Doll Jr. (1993) reasoned that postmodernism looked to the past to reformulate the process of learning, building upon Aristotle's belief that we learn by *doing*, an idea which had been negated by modernity. Similarly, Usher and Edwards argue for 'the centrality of experiential learning to the postmodern moment' (1994, p. 205), whereby experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience (Itin 1999). UTS students who participate in the Shopfront program, as well as the many other activist groups which have emerged over the years, effectively engage in experiential learning, as they deal critically and creatively with reality in a quest to transform their world (Wildemeersch & Jansen 1992).

In 2010 Shopfront moved to the UTS Tower Building, and the Blackfriars site was incorporated into the university's main campus. Arguably, the way in which the space is currently used for teaching and learning reflects the two major features of 'the postmodern' identified by Lyotard; the loss of credibility of the 'grand narratives' and a radical emphasis on plurality (Jansen & Wildemeersch 1992). For example, the subject 'Australian Past and Places', taught to UTS students at the Blackfriars campus, investigates the multiple ways in which Australia's history can be written- through memory, primary sources, the senses, emotional experiences- thus denying the possibility of a universal truth, and encouraging an acceptance of the 'multiplicity of theoretical standpoints' (Peters 2001, p. 7).

Yet it would be naive to infer a clear-cut opposition between modernity and postmodernity, wrong to state that the Blackfriars precinct has been entirely overtaken by postmodernist thought in recent years and that the ideas of the modern are no longer relevant to our understanding of the site today.

Postmodernity is modernity that has admitted the non-feasibility of its original project. Postmodernity is modernity reconciled to its own 10 impossibility- and determined for better or worse, to live with it. Modern practice continues- now, however, devoid of the objective that once triggered it off. (Bauman 1991, p. 98)

As articulated by Bauman, neither modernity nor postmodernity can be viewed in isolation; rather, they function symbiotically, in constant conversation and debate with one another. The Blackfriars site, as part of the UTS campus, is to this day implicit in the university's quest for

advancement, evidenced by the continual technological and pedagogical developments. Yet having realised the ‘non-feasibility’ of the optimistic metanarratives of progress, universality and truth, this modernist project is undertaken within a more realistic postmodern mindset, which accepts the plurality and ambivalence of our world. To quote Jansen and Wildemeersch, contemporary educational discourse is ‘currently learning to come to terms with ambiguity, difference and uncertainty, while losing the naivety that it will produce the ‘ultimate’ correct answers’ (1992, p. 31).

Blackfriars Public School has been a hub of innovative education practice for over a century, yet *what* students have learnt- and *how*- has changed exponentially over time. By tracing the evolution of the site and its teaching methods in tandem with the ideas of ‘the modern’ and ‘the postmodern’, it becomes evident that our contemporary education system has been, and will continue to be, shaped by a complex dialogue between these two historical forces. In true modernist fashion, society continues to strive for improvement and progress through the cultivation of young minds, yet is at all times kept in check by the postmodern awareness and acceptance of the ambivalence, plurality and unpredictability of the world in which we live.

Notes on Contributor

Miranda Middleton is studying Journalism and International Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney.

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