

Guest editors' introduction to special theme issue: Challenging spaces

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For Michael John Maurice Danaher
and Raymond Barry Moriarty

Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave
London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for
there is in London all that life can afford.

James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*

As they stared blankly, in dumb misery deepening as they slowly
realised all they had seen and all they had lost, a capricious little
breeze, dancing up from the surface of the water, tossed the aspens,
shook the dewy roses and blew lightly and caressingly in their faces;
and with its soft touch came instant oblivion. For this is the last best
gift that the kindly demi-god is careful to bestow to those to whom he
has revealed himself in their helping: the gift of forgetfulness. Lest the
awful remembrance should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth
and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-
lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they
should be happy and lighthearted as before.

Kenneth Grahame, *The wind in the willows*,
Chapter VII "The piper at the gates of dawn"

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Rationale

This special issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* explores the theme of 'Challenging spaces: Educational provisional and possibilities in contemporary regional and rural communities'. This theme provides the framework within which the papers presented in this volume offer multiple engagements with the proposition that spaces – whether cultural, geographical, institutional or whatever – are economic and political constructions. The articles offer different theoretical perspectives for making sense of the constructions of space within various regional and rural educational contexts. While regional and rural spaces are sometimes represented as "other" to their metropolitan and urban counterparts, thereby challenging those residents in potentially marginalising ways, the articles demonstrate the several ways in which those same residents participate

in challenging the bases of their marginalisation, by means of a wide range of approaches and strategies to shape educational provision in terms of possibilities that are more appropriate and empowering to themselves. Thus the aim of this issue is to map ways in which regional and rural education is both challenging for members of those communities and an opportunity for those members to challenge the intent and impact of that education.

Education, in a broad sense, has the potential to transform the opportunities of regional and rural residents as they negotiate the physical, institutional and cultural (meaning-making) spaces that constitute their lived experiences. Such an education occurs in many places and on many levels, to some extent represented by the diversity of spaces interrogated in the articles forming this issue. The topics in this issue range in focus from migration to gender, and from the workplace (in several conceptualisations) to mobility.

This special issue can be understood within the broad scope of the journal's aspiration "to contest, disrupt and transform unhelpful and disabling binaries confronting contemporary educational research and practice". *Challenging spaces* is designed to contribute to and promote that focus and scope by facilitating the ongoing contestation, disruption and transformation of the urban/rural binary that implicitly and routinely positions rural residents as deficit and deficient in relation to their metropolitan counterparts. The editors and authors of *Challenging spaces* argue that resisting and changing this binary must operate on several fronts simultaneously: conceptual, methodological and empirical. Hence the emphasis in the issue on using conceptual lenses as ways of understanding anew the complex and diverse links between marginalisation and opportunity in educational provision in regional and rural locations.

Furthermore, the journal's focus on "publishing research that explores education that is multidisciplinary, multimodal and multisectoral in character – and that is also formal and informal, lifelong and lifewide, and liable to contribute to sociocultural resistance and transformation" is facilitated via the issue's bringing together articles that cover primary and secondary schooling and university education and that draw on concepts from multiple disciplines deployed to enhance sociocultural critique. The editors and authors of *Challenging spaces* are committed similarly to identifying and disseminating conceptually framed and empirically tested strategies that contribute to fulfilling the enabling and transformative potential of education in regional and rural settings.

In foregrounding the role of space in this issue, we are engaging from multiple perspectives a concept that has assumed great significance in scholarship generally, thanks in part to contributions from academic fields as diverse as new physics and cultural studies. As astrophysics and nano-science have stretched our comprehension of physical space as extending from the microscopic to the intergalactic, cultural studies has drawn attention to the complex institutional and virtual apprehensions of space. Education (particularly at the school level) is often framed within the institutional structure of disciplinary space as derived from Michel Foucault's famous study of the power relations within the French prison system, *Discipline and punish* (1995), first published in 1975. While Foucault's study retains significance as an influential exploration of the connection between practices of institutional space and power operations at the level of bodily dispositions, other theorists have explored how such spaces might be negotiated in ways that give the practitioner some room for movement and resistance. So, while spaces might challenge those who occupy them in terms of exerting certain

constraints and limiting options, such occupiers might also challenge these spaces, finding ways of extending their parameters or resisting their arrangements.

The contextual focus on regional and rural communities adds a particular set of challenges to this volume's exploration of space. While urban and suburban spaces are often identified in terms of characteristics such as the metropolis, the centre, the civilised, the settled and even the normal; regional and rural spaces are often represented in relation to concepts such as the marginal, the different, the exotic and the wilderness. The relative impoverishment of many rural communities, the prevalence of natural disasters such as droughts and floods and the widespread media focus on horrific crimes such as the backpacker murders and the Falconio case, aspects of which inspired the recent Australian movie *Wolf creek* (McLean, 2005), help to create a widespread sense of regional spaces as being dangerous and lacking.

At the same time, there is a sense that the geography of lived spaces is being in itself marginalised within studies of identity formations. While markers of gender and ethnicity have received extensive study in terms of their role in shaping life chances and cultural values, much recent attention has been directed to the role of generational differences. Three books (Heath, 2006; Huntley, 2006; Sheahan, 2005) have been published recently in Australia addressing the interests and values of so-called Generation Y: those people born between 1970 and the early 1980s. While economic and cultural change over the past decade and beyond certainly has implications for emerging generations, the idea of an age demographic as the primary marker of life values is open to challenge. Bernard Salt (2006) has argued, for example, that if Australia is a nation of tribes it is the geography of where we live rather than the demography of our age that establishes loyalties and defines interests (see also Matchett, 2006, p. 40).

That is not to suggest that where we live casts a homogeneous mould shaping a wholly shared and unified set of values nor does it mean that other identity markers such as age, gender and ethnicity are overwhelmed by geographical affinities. Rather, we can trace a complex process of interspersal among these different identity markers within the particular geographical spaces where they emerge. It is evident that the enduring and quite immediate sensory connection between individuals and the geographical space in which they live and through which they move does play a constitutive role that inflects attachments to other markers such as age, gender and ethnicity.

It is in this sense that this special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* posits the role of spaces as constitutive. It provides a point of departure to consider the complex relations among different spaces and the parties who engage with them. When we begin to challenge these spaces, we are in turn challenged by them, transformed in our understanding of space and the practices possible within it.

Overview

1. Jennifer Elsdon-Clifton explores the connections between space and embodied subjectivity within the art classroom. Drawing on the art and visual journals of migrant students within three secondary regional schools, she works through connections among bodies, boundaries, belonging, space, transgressions and mobility. Art in this sense can be understood as a particular spatial practice through which transitional states and the politics of location might be engaged as an empowering migrant experience.

2. Simon Clarke and Elizabeth Stevens consider the experience of a novice teaching principal at a rural primary school. They suggest that the context of a small regional community constitutes a particularly challenging space for an inexperienced principal. Focusing on issues such as the construction of the principal's professional identity, the article considers the implications for the preparation and development of novice principals within such rural schooling spaces.
3. Bronwyn Ellis and Joy Penman write about the interactions between a regional campus of an otherwise metropolitan university (the Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia) and the students and community of that region. The authors focus on the provision of teaching and learning environments to engage a more diverse group of learners than would be the case at metropolitan campuses, creating new learning contexts that are accessible to a wider community. The article explores the way in which teaching and learning are extended across a variety of challenging spaces.
4. Geoff Danaher, Beverley Moriarty and Patrick Alan Danaher apply Michel Foucault's thinking about space, and particularly his concept of heterotopia, to the experiences of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children. Heterotopia considers the effects of very different social spaces coming into contact with one another. The authors explore how this dedicated travelling show school challenges different understandings of geographical and social space.

The edition concludes with a respondent's commentary from Dr Jen Webb, associate professor in the School of Creative Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Canberra. She engages with the implications emerging from the theoretical and empirical explorations of space canvassed in this issue. It is hoped that such explorations can stimulate ongoing discussion that will open up further challenging spaces.

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