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Place Matters: Producing Power and Identity

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Abstract: *“Place” plays a significant role in producing power relations in continuing professional education. Where we “locate” our CPE programs influences not only their purposes and processes but also produces the identities of the participating professionals and professions as well as the power professionals and professions exercise in society.*

Having worked as a continuing educator for a number of years in a variety of contexts, I have come to wonder about a seemingly inconsequential decision: where do we locate our continuing professional education programs and why do we put them where we do? Practically, continuing educators often answer such questions by default: the facility they represent or what is available are the de facto solutions. Theoretically, the question has had almost no importance. If addressed at all, it shows up in check lists in meeting planning manuals (were meeting rooms reserved, what seating arrangements were requested). I believe, however, that where we choose to place our continuing education programs has a profound effect on what happens and what the consequences are. To put this question more theoretically, how does socially-constructed, materially-defined *place* produce the professional identity and power of participants and professions?

In my view “place” matters. Place plays a significant role in shaping continuing professional education because people invest in place to empower themselves (Harvey, 1993). The “location” of our CPE programs significantly influences the power relations that shape the identities of the participating professionals as well as the ability to exercise that professional power. Thus the locating of CPE programs is not just a matter of technical programmatic exercise as typically presumed but represents significant programming dilemmas whose ultimate arbitration have important consequences for the identity of professionals and their ability to exercise power in society.

In brief, that is the problem and my response to it. I have considered various aspects of the issues in different places. I began with a detailed accounting and analysis of a case study of continuing professional education in which I was a participant (for an extended depiction of the case, see Wilson, in press

a). The point of that exercise was to reflect upon my experience within light of specific theoretical questions relating the question of place with the production of power and identity. Subsequently, I reported more directly the specific findings of that analysis along with a discussion of the methodology I used in constructing the case and its analysis (Wilson, in press b). The purpose of this paper is to focus more on the theoretical construction of the question itself with a specific interest in considering some of the attendant ambiguities framing how to understand the relations among place, power, and identity. To organize the paper, I first overview the two theoretical traditions I have drawn upon to ask this question. Then I address theoretical issues related to understanding place, power, and identity. I conclude with a brief review of findings in order to offer my admonitions for CPE practice.

Place Matters: Locating a Politics of Identity

Much “modern” adult education theory has tended to be functionalist, that is, structuralist, ahistorical, and apolitical. In recent decades there has been a decided attempt to historicize American adult education as well as engage in a more “critical” analysis of it in order to understand better our political and ethical responsibilities as adult educators. Such analyses, while quite important, are limited because understanding the role of power in adult education practice is more than a matter of revealing its historical antecedents or theorizing its presence in the here and now. Both frames of analysis struggle with their perceived lack of utility; working adult educators too often find it too easy to dismiss such insights because the relevance remains unapparent in practical ways. In an attempt to address that legitimate concern, I draw upon the spatial analysis of human interaction (the “new geography”) to help understand the political consequences of everyday

adult education practice. Harvey (1992, p. 3) has noted that “there are real geographies of social action, real as well as metaphorical territories and spaces of power” in order to ask “why and by what means do social beings invest places ... with social power; and how and for what purposes is that power then deployed and used across a highly differentiated system of interlinked places?” (p. 21).

To expand and ground the political analysis of adult education practice I examine the relationships among place, power, and identity. To do that I will draw upon two related conversations focused on the one hand on reasserting “space” into social analysis (Bird, et al., 1992; Friedland & Boden, 1994; Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1989) and on the other on what has come to be termed the “politics of identity” (Keith & Pile, 1993). I use the paper to introduce these starting points to argue that the social construction of place, as a constituting and constituted dimension of human interaction, plays a key role in producing and reproducing power and identity (Harvey, 1993). I parrot Harvey’s (1993) questions, by what social processes is space constructed, in order to ask how place shapes/produces power and identity in adult education. Practically, this leads to examining how place, power, and identity shape and are shaped by adult education practice.

The Reassertion of Space and the Location of Identity

There is a stream of analysis focused on “reasserting space” into social analysis (Bird, et al., 1992; Friedland & Boden, 1994; Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1989). It is becoming increasingly clear in much recent social analysis that not only are knowledge and power interconnected (see, e.g., Foucault, 1980; Giddens, 1984) but that knowledge, power, space/place closely intertwine to frame our social practices (Friedland & Boden, 1994; Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1989): “space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic” (Lefebvre as cited in Soja, 1989, p. 80). As Foucault (1984, p. 252) has remarked, “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.” Earlier Foucault (1980, p. 149) had commented that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers.” Soja (1989, p. 20) interprets Foucault as constructing a “crucial nexus,” “a linkage between space, knowledge, and power” which

Foucault describes as “the spatializing description of discursive realities giv[ing] on to the analysis of related effects of power” (1980, p. 149). I take this to mean, following on Foucault, that structures of meaning which are implicated in the production and use of power are themselves implicated and produced in specific places (while this reads in a linearly causal way, it is more adequately envisioned relationally and recursively). While the thing we call “place” may begin as a physical construct, “the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience” (Soja, 1989, p. 79-80). Most directly then, space does more than provide the “settings of interaction” (Giddens, 1984); it itself is a fundamental constituent of knowledge/power regimes. The point to draw from these various comments is that in order to understand something like continuing education in the professions we have to map a geography of it as a set of social practices, a human geography in which power is created, enacted, altered.

A second framing concept, one evolving from the identity debates of the past several decades, is that of “locating a politics of identity” (Keith & Pile, 1993). The question of identity has, of course, a long history. But as Bondi (1993) has put it, the postmodern twist of “who am I,” with its persistently pesky political connotations, has increasingly become also a locational question of “where am I.” In trying to understand this locationalness of identity, Keith and Pile (1993) reject synchronic or essentialist approaches to put forth Baudelarian, Foucauldian notions of identity as becoming or process. What makes their analysis poststructuralist as well as postmodernist is the premium they place on the creation of subjectivity and difference as definers of identity: “Any articulation of identity . . . is only momentarily complete In such a fragile world of identity formation and object formation, political subjects are articulated through moments of closure that create subjects as surfaces of inscription . . . invariably incomplete” (p. 27). Thus a significant poststructuralist question is the debate between a sanctified cogito and an inscribed subjectivity. But this poststructuralist concern with the inscription of subjectivities is also profoundly locational: identity and location are inseparable. Paraphrasing Benjamin, to know oneself is “an exercise in mapping where one stands” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 26). As Harvey (1993) says, to understand the complex dimensions of human interaction we have

to recognize a “locality” to them, a “placeness” that is both constituted as well as constituting, or as Giddens (1979) would say, both medium and outcome. So difference and location combine to define identity within a relational field: “There is no identity outside of its context” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 28). Thus the “place of politics” cannot meaningfully be separated from the “politics of place” (Keith & Pile, 1993). So, in terms of constructing a geography of continuing professional education as sets of social practices and power relations, I also see as part of that mapping a process of analyzing the relationships between location and identity formation.

Attendant Ambiguities: Place and Identity

Given these starting points – space as key component of social analysis and place as fundamental to identity – there are two theoretical problems of concern to much analysis in the new geography and the politics of identity and which also help shape this analysis: “space” is neither a self-evident concept nor a transparent metaphor (Friedland & Boden, 1994; Keith & Pile, 1993; Smith, 1992; Soja, 1989). Put another way, space is not an empty container in which history unfolds nor is its meaning stable enough to be plundered at will by those presuming its meaning is uncontested. For example, in the many forms of 20th century Marxist analysis, history is the presumed cauldron out of which springs the materialist conditions structuring society; space is “dead” in this view, whereas time is the active agent (Harvey, 1992; Soja, 1989). More recently in the proliferation of positional presentments, “space” has become a foundationalist metaphor for the conceptualization of identity politics (Keith & Pile, 1993; Smith & Katz, 1993). In either case the use of space has become problematic, one in its perceived non-effect and two in the presumed consensus of literal and metaphoric meanings. Let me unpack these claims in a bit more detail.

In terms of the presumed self-evidentialness of the idea of space, Friedland and Boden argue that against the backdrop of typical 19th and 20th century historicist analysis, “a variety of analysts are attempting to rethink the consequences of modernity with new understandings of space and time” (1994, p. 21). Foremost among these analysts surely must be Giddens whose ongoing project of standing classical sociology on its head has routinely relied upon his concepts of “time-space distanciation” to

reframe social analysis (see, in particular, 1979 & 1984). In Giddens’ view, the very framework of our social lives, modernity, is fundamentally shaped by a different sense of space and time than in pre-modern times. Likewise, Jameson (1989), noted cultural critic and theorist of the postmodern, has also argued that space is a fundamental organizing concern for analyzing social life. In his analysis of the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” he has shown how the reshaping of our sense of space – “post-modern hyperspace” – “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself” (1989, p. 45). This lost sense of space has led to a “sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (1989, p. 45). Soja’s concerns are more explicitly political: “we must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies are filled with politics and power” (1989, p. 6). More recently Herod has summarized a stream of analysis: “The making of the economic and social landscape in particular ways is now recognized as being fundamental to the articulation of political power” (1997, p. 1). Important for understanding the role of place in producing power in continuing professional education is the claim Keith and Pile (1993, p. 24) add that “space is produced and reproduced and thus represents the site and outcome of social, political, and economic struggle.” This means we have to come to understand how space is represented, how its meaning is produced, and who gets to produce it. Space, then, is not nothing but rather a significant constituent of social life. This insight is significant in understanding the relationships among place, power, and identity in continuing professional education.

The second observation, that the literal and metaphoric meanings of space/place are neither stable nor self-evident, is also significant for mounting the analysis of place and power. This has become particularly evident in the continuing debates about the politics of identity in which locational metaphors uncritically abound (Keith & Pile, 1993). It has become routine to talk about place as if everyone agreed upon its meaning:

Much social and cultural theory in the last two decades has depended heavily on spatial metaphors. The myriad “decenterings” of modernism . . . the displacement of political economy by cultural discourse, and a host of other “moves” have been facilitated by a very fertile lexicon of spatial metaphors: subject positionality, locality, mapping, grounding, travel, (de/re)centering, theoretical space, ideological space, symbolic space, conceptual space, space of signification . . . If such metaphors functioned initially in a very positive way . . . they may now have taken on a much more independent existence that discourages as much as allows fresh political insight. It may be too soon to suggest that these spatial metaphors are out of control, but they are headed that way . . . for the most part they are employed unselfconsciously. (Smith, 1992, p. 97-98)

By decade’s end, that control may have been lost. Echoing Smith’s concern, Bondi notes (1993, p. 99), “the point is that if they are to retain their potency, the geographical metaphors of contemporary politics must be informed by conceptions of space that recognize place, position, location and so on as *created*, as *produced*” (original emphasis) – another key insight in understanding the relationship among place, power, and identity in continuing professional education.

Following on the theoretical perspective I introduce here, space has to be seen as a constituting and constituted dimension of human interaction as well as a significant factor in the politics of identity. Because the social construction of place is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of power differentials (Harvey, 1993), this leads to looking at how space/place shape adult education practice in continuing education: we must ask by what social processes is space/place constructed, in order to ask how does place shape/produce power and identity in continuing education for the professions. Thus the key question I take on here is how to understand the connections among place, power, and identity: How does place contribute to producing the power and identity of professionals? The practical problem I pose is the way in which space/place are implicated in and shaping of what many take to be the apolitical, routine technical work of developing and managing continuing education in the professions.

Analysis: Place, Community, and Discourse

The social construction of place can be analyzed in three ways: as the meaning attributed to specific physical places, as a community of social interactions, and as a discourse about place (Harvey, 1993), each of which contributes to producing power relations. I have used this analytical matrix to ask how place, power, and identity are implicated in and shaping of what many take to be the apolitical, routine technical work of producing and implementing adult education programs (Wilson, in press b). I analyzed a continuing professional education program produced on a college campus. First, I first looked at the role of physical place in continuing education: How did the participants’ understanding of the physical location of the program contribute to constructing the professional identity and power of the participating professionals? Second, I showed how the academic location helped to construct social networks associated with the power and identity accorded academic places. Finally, I discussed the creation of professional discourse shaped by its location in an academic place. Thus I used place, community, and discourse to comment on their role in producing/reproducing the identity this group of professionals was trying to construct for itself as well as the professional power they were seeking to achieve through this process of bating their professional identity. I showed how place, community, and discourse came together to construct the identity and power of the participants and the profession and how power and identity are played out and through and in place.

Producing Professional Power and Identity

As frequently pointed out, adult educators for too long have attempted to define themselves professionally as technicians of educational process. If analysis is to be plausible, strategic, and morally grounded (Forester, 1989), then we must work to make clear the politics and ethics that illuminate our technical expertise. Building on previous work (Cervero & Wilson, 1994), I am using this paper to argue for a specific politicalness to our practice – which leads to the necessity of naming and standing our ethical ground. The practical relevance is to make suggestions for how we might as adult educators rethink our roles and practices in shaping adults’ power relations and identity in society by highlighting the political and ethical demands of program planning. Elsewhere I have argued for

adult educators, in the face of increasing power disparities among their constituencies, to take specific advocacy roles rather than present themselves as technical facilitators (Wilson, 2000). Here I seek to expand that set of responsibilities with a sense of adult education's part in producing place, power, and identity and how our work as adult educators directly produces relations of power. If we are to become responsible educators, we must take up these challenges – for if we do not, we become unwitting accomplices in the differentiated production of power through our educational efforts and all our philosophical and historical rhetoric about social change and democratic participation is for naught.

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