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Location, Relocation, Dislocation Learning Cultures or Cultures of Learning?

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Learning Cultures or Cultures of Learning?

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Keywords: Location, learning, culture, postmodern, anthropology
Abstract: Following a recent organizational relocation, the impact on the teaching and learning became evident. In analyzing the impact of change, the most useful way of understanding the change was to utilize the postmodern concepts of location and (dis)location, and to consider using anthropological research techniques to identify cultures of learning.

Introduction

This paper argues that whilst the notion of *a learning culture* is problematic, it points to the significance of *location* of learning, and the impact of change. Having established the theoretical basis for location, and the significance of the construction of a learning culture, the paper presents an alternative perspective emerging from an ongoing research project being undertaken by the author that focuses on the identification of *cultures of learning* within adult, further and higher education.

Location

The paper takes a critical theory approach to the research and its analysis. In particular, it picks up the notion of location as derived from postmodernist discussions around space/place and links into critical cultural theories through, for example, the work of Henry Giroux (1992) who drew attention to the politics of *location*, in discourses around agency. Whilst his analysis, influenced by the ideas of Edward Said and bel hooks, is primarily interested in the struggles in post-colonial discourse, there is an interpretation of learning contexts as hegemonic sites that make and take cultural formations that may be understood as over-determining the forms and processes of learning in specified locations. Set in the context of debates around agency and structure, and knowledge and power, Giroux proposes that the "politics of location has provided a new vocabulary for analysing how we are situated differently in the interplay of power, history, and culture" (Giroux, 1992, p.26). Further, the discourse of location not only incorporates the notion of boundaries, as well as those with power to draw and re-draw boundaries around location, but more broadly encompasses space. Along with a series of other "turns" within social sciences, including the possibility that there has been a "cultural" turn (Jameson, 1998), it has more recently been proposed that there has been a "spatial" turn (Paechter, 2004), that has clarified that location not only has "space" but also "time", and that there is a relationship between space and time. The materiality of space is an important dimension of social life. Whilst there has been a long history of concern with space in formal education, in recent years this has been neglected, though presumably the notion of "situated learning" within the study of work-based learning, has reminded us of the significance of location for learning, wishing, as it does, to distinguish, the spaces for learning in the workplace, and the space for learning in informal educational institutions. It is interesting to note the difference, however (Colley et al., 2002). In the previous traditions of examining locations, this was to do with the control and influence over physical space. Contemporary, and post-modern discussions treat space (and time) in more metaphorical ways. An illustration of this is the discussion of the relationship between

globalization and spatial locations, such as Richard Edwards' (1994) interest in the globalizing influences of open and distance learning, where the location of learning was in itself seen to be important, albeit polarised so that it was learning not taking place 'here'. But in working with Robin Usher, the two came to realise that globalization 'is responsible for and responsive to space-time compression where distances can be covered far quicker than in previous times and people, goods and images are available to each other on an almost instantaneous basis'. They go on to say that 'space-time compressions therefore foregrounds the significance of place and location' (Edwards and Usher, 1997a; p.136). Their agenda is to establish that the significance of 'location' is as a 'central interpretative metaphor' which contributes to the reconfiguration of pedagogy. Whilst not denying the significance of the metaphor, I wish to bring together the spatial and cultural 'turns', to acknowledge the metaphor, but also to remind ourselves that locations are not only socially and culturally constructed, but do still have a physical, material and historical reality.

When I first entered university adult education in the late 1970s, there were few textbooks on the subject in the UK, but those that did exist offered advice on making the learning environment appropriate for teaching adults. Essentially this meant moving furniture to establish an environment conducive to adult learning. There were jokes about this: anyone who in other contexts attempted to move furniture was identified as an 'adult educator', as though the concern for the learning environment was only found among those teaching adults. The issue of location was heightened since the majority of accommodation used for the provision of adult education, in both the university sector and outside, was rarely purpose-built. In 1982, a research project was being undertaken into the prime use of educational premises by adult education. Among its findings were that since 1945 major capital building for adult education had been almost non-existent; and that almost all public sector adult education was accommodated in school or college premises, the primary function of which is to provide for compulsory schooling or technical and vocational education (Percy, Normie and Saunders, 1982, p.23). For over thirty years, adult education had been 'borrowing' teaching space (technically, we 'rented' it) from other educational providers. As a consequence, adult educators got used to teaching in all kinds of locations. But this was symbolic too, of the lack of status of adult education compared with formal and compulsory education provision. Moreover, it influenced the pedagogical relationship with learners. In the days before Information Technologies and interactive whiteboards, this influence over pedagogy may not have been so obvious. For the 1982 research project, more emphasis was placed on *social* rather than *academic* space:

> There is no doubt that this is one area in which prime and non-prime use centres can be clearly differentiated. We saw some impressive coffee rooms, lounges and bars in our case-studies. Our informants, staff and students, impressed on us how crucial these facilities were in the attractions of the centres….: 'Although the quality of the provision is important, the coffee bar might come before. It is important from the social interaction point of view. It is the focal point, perhaps every adult education centre should start with the coffee bar'. (Percy, Normie, & Saunders, 1982, p.27)

The project also talked about "ambience" or "ethos" of the learning spaces. A more recent conceptualization is the idea of the need to develop "learning cultures".

Relocation

In the summer of 2005, the School of Continuing Education at the university in which I work was closed down. A substantial number of staff (particularly clerical and administrative) lost their jobs, whilst most of the academic staff were retained (albeit for some on temporary short-term contracts to allow their programs to be 'taught out'). We were distributed around the university. I am part of a core which collectively comprised the "Lifelong Learning Institute", which was transferred to the School of Education—a school which largely provides initial teacher training and continuing professional development for school teachers in the compulsory sector. Organizationally, the Masters in Lifelong Learning for which I was program director, was already located in the School, and so I had an acute awareness of the differences between the "ethos" of Education compared with Continuing Education. The physical location and geographical distance was reflected as organisational difference. Whenever our program was required to come into line with the School of Education's policies and procedures, our program team would decide whether it was beneficial, and if it was not, we would either ignore the request, or undertake subversive strategies to avoid coming into line, including insisting on having further meetings where we could persuade them to come into line with us. Now, we are expected to come into line with all their procedures. We have to accommodate to their requirement for assimilation. Among the many repercussions of this is that the pedagogic relationship with our adult, part-time students has been negatively impacted upon, as we have to accommodate to procedures put in place for younger, full-time students (in the interests of standards and "fairness"!).

By coincidence, having won a three-year University Teaching Fellowship earlier in 2005, I was already proposing to undertake a university-wide project on investigating cultures of learning within the university. Relocation has since brought me into direct contact with another set of cultures of learning, to compare with the cultures of learning that I had shared in before re-structuring. Previously, our School was located just off the main campus, and we felt ourselves to be on the margins. This was comfortable for our mission to serve local communities and to be part of the outreach arm of the university. Now we are located at the very heart of the university, in a building three floors below the university's administrative and senior management power hub. We have been mainstreamed, and brought under control.

Dislocation

Relocation does not necessarily entail (dis)location (as used by Edwards and Usher, 1997a and 1997b, the use of brackets signifying that location and dislocation are 'simultaneous moments that are always found together'). Had we been demanding a relocation because we felt marginalized; or had the period of the transfer from the margins to the mainstream been over a longer period of time, in which we could have been assimilated more slowly and possibly less painfully, there might have been a reduced sense of dislocation. However, the sense of dislocation has served an important purpose, to enable us to experience the ways in which space and time compression foregrounds, as Edwards and Usher argue, drawing on Giddens (1990), the significance of place and time: "Even as there are processes of de-territorialisation and the growth of consciousness of the globe as one place—a global village—there is paradoxically, at the same time, heightened consciousness of the relativity of place and an assertion of the local and the specific" (Edwards and Usher, 1997a, p136). What we are experiencing therefore, is a microcosm of globalization, signifying an "ambivalent pedagogy or a pedagogy of ambivalence" (Edwards and Usher, 1997a, p137), which provides a pedagogy of (dis)location enabling us to

gain deeper insight into what constitutes learning itself, which has now been problematized through (dis)location, albeit through a shift in identity *from* being the "other" to being positioned in the dominant culture of the mainstream.

Constructing a culture of learning

Soon after coming into power in the UK for the first time in eighteen years, the Labour Government set up a national; advisory group to make recommendations for the future provision of lifelong learning. The group, chaired by Bob Fryer, produced two reports. The first (NAGCELL, 1997) argued that what was needed in the UK was the development of a *culture of learning*, and in the second report (NAGCELL, 1998) there were suggestions as to how a learning culture may be constructed. Fryer's advisory group encouraged the government to "set out its vision of a culture of lifelong learning", a "popular and coherent vision of a nationwide learning culture for the many. . . which will envisage learning as normal, accessible, productive and enjoyable (if demanding) feature of everyday life, for all people, throughout their lives', and 'will not confine learning to particular places, methods or forms of learning"—though schools and colleges would be responsible for stimulating the love of learning. The envisaged learning culture will "extend to all varieties and kinds of homes and families, to places of paid employment, to voluntary and community settings and to the realms of leisure, culture, recreation, and the arts", embracing "a broad range of forms and types of education and training, whether formal or informal". In this learning culture for all, individuals themselves will take responsibility for their own learning and its management throughout their lives, to support both "individual and collective well-being and achievement". "It will foster people's creativity, strengthen citizenship and contribute to economic success for the whole country as a whole, for business, for communities and for individuals and families". What is more, the development of this learning culture will "also help to challenge prejudice in all its forms, enhance tolerance and underpin the values of a civilised, pluralistic and inclusive society". In short, it will reduce social exclusion and poverty, promote greater social cohesion, reduce social divisions and foster greater international understanding.

Transforming Learning Cultures is a name of a project funded as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Project (TLRP) through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK. It is a collaboration of four local partnerships between further and higher education that began in April 2001. The title of the project is ambiguous. On the surface it refers to the possibilities of changing learning cultures. Within this meaning, the assumption is that learning cultures already exist, that their distinctive features can be identified, and that there are strategies available for bringing about change in those cultures. The purpose here of mentioning this project on learning cultures, their creation and transformation, is to highlight the process of reification, which the TLRP project celebrates by using Wenger's (1998) idea that partnership and reification are key aspects of understanding the possibilities for both transforming learning cultures and encouraging transformative learning.

This ambiguity has been recognised within the project. One of the key players wrote that the work of Lave and Wenger is useful because is suggests 'the powerful idea that *transformation* is cultural – that is, it is both a personal and situational or structural process. The title of our research project (*Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education*) is intended to reflect such a double meaning.' (James, 2002, p.4). The irony, of course, is that if Wenger's concept of reification is turned in on the project, then we should be asking in whose interests is the idea of a learning culture? The trick is to avoid giving the notion being researched an

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excessive concreteness and projected reality in looking at the processes by which such notions are socially and culturally constructed. James says that "on the face of it … we wish to explore the utility of learning culture as a conceptual tool", but then adds that "the methodological subtext here is to see whether the notion of learning culture is useful for developing an understanding." (James, 2002, p. 5). This leads to a degree of concretization of the notion, for which a number of shared meanings get constructed through the identification of key features that are recognised as being present or absent in the notion of a "learning culture". The researchers should be well aware of the relevance of Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition: in determining whether there is such a thing as a 'learning culture', the research is part of the very process of its construction. This is not intended as a criticism of the research project. Indeed, from the perspective of the argument in this paper, the existence of the *Transforming Learning Cultures* project confirms that there is something worth researching around location as cultural praxis.

I would question the construction of the notion of a *learning culture*, and the possibility that it can be created or transformed, except as a concept through attribution of meanings. The prefacing of learning in front of ephemeral reifications is commonplace: the "learning organisation", the "learning society" and now the "learning culture". How can an organisation learn? How can society learn? How can a culture learn? Again, this is reification in Wenger's analysis. It is the "process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'. In doing so we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organised" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). It is possible to turn the issue around: it is not a *learning culture*, but *culture of learning*. However, this is still problematic if learning is both a social and cultural construction, and may be even a defining characteristic of a particular culture. Learning is not simply embedded or implicated in culture; it is a set of cultural practices. It is also iconic.

Towards cultural praxis: investigating cultures of learning

The literature on adult learning has for a long time recognized the importance of place or sites of learning and the appropriateness of physical location. Control over the learning environment is considered an essential element in determining the success of adult learning, and many manuals and teacher training programs include, for example, room arrangement as an important part of classroom management. My current research will utilize its results to analyse how room arrangement is more than a means to facilitate participation in the classroom, but how the location is a representation of the culture of learning, reflecting the values of the teacher, the institution and the power relations, and the dominant ideologies around teaching and learning. The research also considers the impact of relocation and (dis)location. As we have seen, whilst these concepts are used widely in terms of people moving to different cultures, they are also appropriate for an understanding of the significance of changing spaces for learning. Using anthropological approaches to ethnographic observations in which learning activities are recorded on/in/through location, participants are invited to analyse the significance of *location* in which the learning takes place. In this sense, location is more than physical, but social and cultural, within a specific political economy. The research process has also recognized among the significant cultural determinants the identification with the discipline or subject. Previous work on the notion of "academic tribes" and their disciplinary cultures (Becher and Trowler 2001) is revisited to strengthen the cultural analysis of learning locations. The purpose is to bring to the surface the deeply-rooted cultural values and political commitments at play, and the

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significance of those hegemonic (or possibly counter-hegemonic) values for approaches to teaching and learning through cultural practices in these sectors. This promises a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the complex cultural and ideological processes that influence teaching and learning as integral to cultural praxis.

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